

SON OF JUSTIN



Richard
Vaughan

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George Malcolm Thompson in the *Evening Standard* said of Mr. Vaughan's first novel, that it was a "blood transfusion for the anaemic British novel." Readers of it will not have forgotten the tempestuous Justin Peele nor his tragic death which ended the feud between the Peeles and the Ellises.

This new novel is the story of Justin's son. It is not so much a sequel to *Moulded in Earth* as the second half of a saga. Its theme is the impact of this illegitimate son on the Peele family and is a brilliant piece of characterization.

On Edwin Peele and his wife Grett falls the burden of the story for it is with their daughter that Justin's son falls in love, and it is Edwin who tells the story as he did in *Moulded in Earth*.

By the same Author

MOULDED IN EARTH
WHO RIDETH SO WILD

RICHARD VAUGHAN

SON OF JUSTIN



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**TO
MY
WIFE**

BOOK ONE

Chapter 1

FOLLOWING that black October when Justin and Jeff were laid in adjacent graves—peace between them at last—the old feud between Grett's people and mine came to an end. Then, as soon as Moc gave up his job at Merthyr to come and live here with the old people, Grett and I moved to Nantsiarad. Sad enough indeed was this beginning of our married life in our new home. The Christmas came on us before we could turn, and terrible it was on Christmas morning when Grett and I went arm-in-arm to the Cockcrow service and found mother kneeling at Justin's grave. Naturally, we were all at Trewern for the rest of the day, Grett's father and mother coming up from Rhos Dirion to join us. Then, that night, though it was as much as he could bear, for a real old flannel he was underneath, Lewsin the Post brought his choir along to sing us a few carols—thinking to cheer us up, no doubt. Dico Lewys for once failed to keep the bass going that night, though father for sure chimed in with the tenors. But poor old Dico broke down half-way through, and stood there on the flank of the little party, hiding his face with the flat of his hand. And for all our grief, hard enough it was to keep a straight face as we looked at Harri Wernlas. His left cheek was like a half moon with toothache; and there he was trying to keep the treble going with a grey woollen stocking safety-pinned around his head.

Then, as time will go even when each day seems endless to you, the New Year was on us. Day after day there was plenty to do; and come the end of February, the lambing

saw me out night after night, Grett with me as I went with the hedges from field to field. Grief drew us together, and little room or occasion there was for any wild passion between us. We felt somehow that to indulge in any stream of desire would be illicit and out of place, though I know now that we were wrong in what we thought, and that youth is all too soon over and done with.

At home here at Trewern, father hardly spoke to anyone. Not one of us knew how he felt, though mother said he was a changed man and easier to live with. Day after day he polished Justin's saddle and when, a week or so after the funeral, the news went round that he had gone down to Alltwen to buy Dai's bull, the parish thought he had gone out of his mind. But they did not know him as we did. Then, when Moc came over to Nantsiarad a night or two afterwards, he told us how after the old man had brought the bull home, he had gone into the barn with the pickaxe, Moc standing by the door and holding the lantern. It had taken only one blow, and with that father squared the killing of Justin and Jeff. Next morning, Moc had driven the carcass over to Brynamman with instruction to Dick butcher to give the meat away gratis. Still, as I say, there were many who thought the old man had acted childishly. Well, there it was. He had his code and he lived by it. Tooth for tooth, eye for eye, and a speng to salt the wound it was with him always. Times he was pig-headed enough and would not listen to reason, though when it came to a stone for Justin's grave I was with him all the way and took his part against mother, vicar, and the rest of them. Quite rightly, as I thought, he had refused to let the stone-cutter put any text on the stone. A verse or a text, he argued, would have been a mockery. So all that was chiselled there in deep-cut letters was the name Justin Peele, and the date of his death. And a fine stone it was; none of your marble or granite, but a blue slab from the bed of the

Sawdde with the sound of the river caught in the green-veined heart of it—or so I liked to think. And enough of a to-do there was to get it out of the river. To hear Moc and the old man as they straddled and heaved to get it on the flat-bottomed gambó was enough almost to bring Justin back to life. Anyway, we carted it up from Cwmsidan to the church, and there it stood some six feet by two and as deep as a small coffer. As Moc said when we had levered it into position, it would be as much as even Justin could do to shift it when the last trump would sound . . .

Mother gave a little smile and wiped her glasses when I told her about it. Yet, even so, our grief was with us all the time, and it seemed the spring would never come again.

But come it did in slanting showers and the wind from Carreg Cennen so soft and sweet as though it was already summer down Towy way. Then, as the days lengthened, so the feel of our new home began to grow on me. I got to know the thorns and the birches, and there were hours round about Easter when I would suddenly become alive to the fact that I had worked for a whole afternoon without thinking of Justin. Then would come the glance in the direction of the church and the realisation that as far as we were concerned it was still winter: no leaves on the trees, and only the mockery of a daffodil against the pale whin. . . .

It was not until four years after this that Sabel was born. A November night it was with the wind roaring and howling up through the valley and the Sawdde boiling in every pool. Grett had been ailing all day, but as it was a fortnight before her time, mother and Mrs. Ellis thought nothing of it. Then, at about one in the morning, her labour began. I gave Doll the edge of my tipped heel that night and did not ease up when taking the steep bend under Graid Ddu, nor did I give Alltwen barn a thought as I left its squat shape behind me on my left. Nothing mattered

now but Grett and our son. We had already decided on his name. 'Justin Jeffrey Peèle it was to be. No other name had even been considered.

As Providence had it, doctor had just come in when I got to his door and was still in his leggings. Despite his weight—and a good ten score or more he must have been, what of his height and width—he showed me how to ride that night. His black cob led me all the way, and times I blessed the resolute back of him as I caught sight of him between the bent hedges and against the sky. By the time we got to Nantsiarad, father and John Ellis were there, and Matti Nanteos was seeing to the hot water and the linen. I could hear Grett's cries from the yard. Where I went after that I don't know. I walked in the wind and rain and made every bargain and pact I could think of with the Almighty. When, at last, I got back to the house, everything was quiet and doctor was coming down the stairs. Behind him came mother, her eyes dazzling behind her glasses. She leaned over the bannisters and called down that I had a daughter. A daughter! Her name came to me at once—Isabel Anne. I turned to father, my heart too full for words. But he had turned away and was standing with his back to me as he stared out through the black window in the direction of the church. I understood at once and left him to his disappointment.

Now followed years so filled with happiness that they should have lasted for ever and ever. No need there was now to read Dafydd ab Gwilym and the old poets, for my joy and heaven were all around me. Every hour of the day was filled with Sabel. Sabel riding with me in the crook of my arm; Sabel following the plough behind me and shooing off the swallows or the rooks as they dipped and wheeled above us like the twirl of a black apron. Sabel sitting between Grett and me in the trap, her head fallen

sleepily against my shoulder as we leaned forward to help the mare up the steep pitches. Sabel walking with me through the old Dyfnant valley, her tiny fingers increasing their pressure on mine as the trees closed in on us and there was nothing to be heard but the wind and the sound of water. Then, as we came out of the valley, so the pressure on my hands would gradually relax, and once more she would be jiggling a yard or two in front of me, her tongue never still for a moment. Sabel winning the under-six solo at the Eisteddfod; Sabel full of grave pretence on Christmas Eve yet shaking with repressed laughter as Grett and I tiptoed in to put our presents on her pillow. Sabel year in, year out, until at last her blue-black pigtails were unbraided and she wore her hair above the creamy nape of her neck.

So the years passed. Our relationship with Grett's family—that is, the relationship between father and John Ellis was a miracle of tact and mutual respect. Even so, I felt all the time that although everything was all right on the surface, deep down each blamed the deaths of Justin and Jeff on to the other. But there was nothing we could do about it. It was the one topic which Grett and I never discussed; and I was always careful not to boast of Justin to Sabel when Grett was about. Hard indeed it was at times to keep quiet, because with me there never was, nor ever could be again, anyone like my brother Justin. Nevertheless, Sabel knew all about him. Once she had started school, she was for ever calling at Trewern on her way home, even though it meant a detour for her of a mile or so. This did she to be brought home by Moc. Time and again on a winter's afternoon with the days drawing in and the old Vans rising dark against the sky, I would go out and stand on the horse-power to see if there was any sign of her. Presently, as I waited there, a light would

flash from Trewern where Moc had hung a lantern to show she was there. It was a pre-arranged signal between us. Milking done, and the separator scoured and polished, we would hear Moc coming down the lane with Sabel behind him, her stockinged legs clamping the mare's flanks like spread calipers.

So it went on. She loved Moc as if he was her elder brother, just as I had felt for Justin and as Grett, no doubt, had loved Jeff. It was always: "Moc told me about the Tug-o'-war today," or, "I heard about the fight at Brecon today. . . . And why didn't you tell me about the Clog-makers and the fight Justin had with their champion?" She knew, too, that Moc had been inside Carmarthen gaol, but this naturally only added to his glory. Then came the day when she came home with her eyes red and swollen. Grett and I looked accusingly at Moc, but all he did was to thrust out his heavy underlip and ride off as soon as he had swung Sabel to the ground. That was the day when she heard of the old feud that had existed between us and Grett's family, and had ended only when Jeff Ellis and Justin had been killed at the bull baiting. She was subdued and quiet for days, and when Palm Sunday—"Sunday of the Flowers," as we call it—came round, she carried two bunches of primroses to church and placed one on each of the two graves.

But to get back for a moment to the old man, because to think of those days is to see him like some tree, strong-rooted in the red soil of the old place. Although everything, as I say, was quiet between us and Rhos Dirion, the old man still kept his distance. In front of people, of course, he was as bland and urbane as ever, too much so in fact. But we knew him better than that, and I once tackled him about it. He said nothing for a minute or so, and I knew better than to hurry him. "No," he said at last, smiling with one side of his mouth, "I got nothing against John

Ellis, Ned; nothing—except that he's an Ellis. Oh yes (I had started to boil at this) I know Grett's an Ellis. But I got nothing against her, not a thing. You couldn't have got a better . . . 'But as for John Ellis'—his smile crept up under his nose—"well, what do you expect? What are you piggatting about? Diain, I don't treat him different to anybody else, do I? You know me. I've never had any friends. Not me. All right with everybody, mind. . . . Of course"—his eyes narrowed as he closed his fist—"if anybody wants trouble, then it's a different matter. But with me it's 'How are you?' . . . 'Good day' . . . and all that to everybody. John Ellis the same as anybody else. . . . But no friends; no friends. . . . You mark my words now. Take advantage friends do, like women. . . . Don't you get too friendly with anybody, Ned. Diawl, not decent it is. You got to respect people; and see to it that they respect you, too. Keep distance, my boy, like I do. And don't start piggatting about me and your father-in-law. Me and him do understand each other. We keep respectful distance, and he don't dare to get too familiar with me." He gave a short laugh at that and squared his shoulders, ready to turn away. "Anyway, you can stop worrying about me and him. Too short a memory you got, Ned; that's what your trouble is. Friends!" He laughed again, and that was the last word on the matter. I never brought it up again. As mother said, that was his philosophy and well he lived it, too; better even than he knew. I don't think though that one of us ever knew him through and through. Even mother's opinion of him was nothing to go by, for she was up one day and down the next was mother. True, she had a strange pride in his strength and the way he always came out top dog. Once, when Elias carpenter or Lewsin said that he was an old tiger, she agreed readily enough with the description of him. But even as she did so, I saw how her eyes shone with secret pride, the colour showing

for once on her pale cheeks. And though I say it now, it was an old tiger he was. He had never wanted for anything, had never worked for anybody but had always been his own master. The only one who had ever stood up to him, speng for speng, and fist for fist if it came to the point, had been Justin. Not that the old man could get far with Moc though. Moc never said anything. Indeed—and the old man was never tired of bragging about it—Moc had never answered father or mother back in all the years he had been with them. He had, in fact, a far more effective way of meeting the old man's moods and rages than by answering him back. Whenever the old man would drive too hard—and in the first few years after Justin's death he had worked from dawn till dark—Moc would suddenly disappear for a fortnight or more on a drinking bout. Then, when his money was given out, Moc would be back again and trying to act as if he had not been gone a day. Somehow or other, he always contrived on his return to be busy on some job before the old people would be up. The cows would be already in, and there would be Moc with his red face buried against the russet flank of one of the Herefords and looking sideways to see how the land lay. Failing that, they would find him perched on a ladder, seeing to the thatch or doing some white-washing. Because they knew him so well, his absence was never alluded to, never even hinted at; though before the week was out he would be scratching around mother for a little in advance on his next pay. There was a rare understanding between mother and Moc. And even if the old man guessed or knew that she gave him an occasional half sovren on the quiet, he never said a word about it or cropped it from his pay. Moc, after all, was one of the family. Yet, despite the years he had spent at Trewern since Justin went, he was never known as Moc Trewern. No, there was no changing his style. From Brecon to Carmarthen town, over in Brynam-

man and down to Ammanford, he was still Moc Mihartach; and many a pub there was that closed its door to him when he was on the randyboo.

Sabel was rising ten when Grett's father and mother went within a year of each other. At first, Grett was all for us moving down to Rhos Dirion. But I was against it. I knew it could be only a matter of a year or two at the most before we would be coming back here to Trewern. The old man was steadily breaking up, though to look at him he was still very much the Daniel Peele we had always known. But his complexion at times was almost purple, and Moc had once found him stretched out on the floor of the barn with his collar torn away from his stud and his eyes milky and glazed. He told Moc he had fallen from the dowlod. But Moc wasn't as simple as that, nor did he breathe a word of it to mother. So we stayed on at Nantsiarad and a heavy enough time we had in the year that followed. Grett was now the only one left of the Ellises. And for all her pathetic attempts at gaiety, there were times when I despaired of getting past the shell of grief that separated her from Sabel and me. For a while she lost weight and I was afraid she might go into a decline. A grey hair or two would sometimes show in the lamplight, but she knew nothing of it. She was never one for the looking-glass was Grett, and Sabel and I would not have told her of it for worlds. Grief, however, is too heavy and sombre a burden to carry for long. As time went by, she was my old lovely Grett again, though perhaps with a little difference. It was as if an early frost had touched her, giving her a September tenderness. Her face and figure gained in quiet grace, and when I would sometime look secretly at her, especially if she was in her Sunday best, I would marvel and say to myself that were I married to some other woman I should, seeing Grett, fall adulterously

in love with her at once. To me she was Grett Ellis all the time. Yes, Grett Rhos Dirion she was, and many were the nights when I would regret our goose-down bed and wish we were again in our old dingle by Cwmsidan woods.

And now came the years of Sabel's maidenhood. Though she won a scholarship to the County, she refused to take it because it would have meant lodgings in town and coming home only for week-ends. There was nothing Grett and I could do to turn her. There it was. Her life was at home here with us on the farm, and there was hardly a thing she could not turn her hand to. She would be up all night with Grett and me during the calving. Once, and once too often it was, she was shameless enough to suggest taking one of the cows down to Felinddu's bull, winking wickedly at me while Grett rated her for her lack of delicacy. Of course, I put my foot down there and then; and Moc even backed me up. It was this madcap, hoyden wildness of hers that gave us so much concern. It seemed there was no holding her back. There was that night soon after we had moved back here to Trewern. She was getting ready to ride down to the village and we all of us happened to be on the yard as she led Doll out of the stable. Then, swinging herself up with one foot in the stirrup, she sat straddle-wise, her skirt high and showing her garters. Before Grett or I could say a word, father had rasped out: "Pull your skirts down, los. A young woman you are now. It is a side-saddle you should be using. Shame on you, showing all you got!"

Sabel laughed down at him as she tugged her skirt down over her knees. The red tam on her black hair made her look like a gipsy. Then, with a flick of her horn-handled crop, she was away. We could hear her for a minute or more as she tore down through the Allt.

"No need to ask who she takes after," said Grett. I

looked sideways at her. Her lips were prim, but do what she would, her dimples came and went as she tried not to smile.

The old man opened his eyes and pretended he could not understand what she was driving at.

"A pity it is we didn't name her Justinia or something like it," went on Grett. "It's a Peele she is from her heel to her crown."

Father turned away to hide his pleasure, and mother wiped her glasses.

"Nonsense!" The old man spoke over his shoulder. "A Peele indeed! Too much of a beauty she is for that. Don't talk lol!"

He did not turn his head to see how Grett had taken the compliment, but walked across the yard, twirling his stick as he went.

From that day I marvelled more and more at Sabel's resemblance to Justin. Not that she took after him in looks. As the old man had said, and no soft soap either, she was an Ellis as far as looks went. But in her ways and temperament she was Justin through and through. There was hardly a month went by when she would not be lost in some wild infatuation. It was nothing out of the way to see her down by the Lyswen singing to herself or running across the fields in the morning to meet Lewsin with the post. Then would follow spendthrift extravagances on Mart day, and come the following Sunday she would spend hours in the glass and turn out in a new frock or hat. But here again—and this was Sabel as we had come to know her and to expect of her—these infatuations never lasted long. A day would come when she would ride down to the village in her oldest clothes, looking for all the world like a gypo, her blouse open where it should have been high buttoned, and the sunburn on her throat going down in a dark vee to where her skin was rich and shadowy. Nor

was she above asking Moc for a cigarette, though out of respect for 'the old people' (not for Grett or me) she never once smoked in front of them. Still, in spite of all this, nothing untoward happened, though Matti Nanteos more than once hinted it would be as well if her legs were tied.

So, with season following season, the years slipped by. First the lambing; then the shearing and the harvest; and before you could look around it was the harvest or the hunter's moon with the old Vans as dark and mysterious as ever on the skyline and set like an imponderable seal on our daily round. And then, suddenly, Jasper came into our lives and everything changed. Once more, just as when Justin had been alive and we stood four-square against the parish, Trewern became the talk of the place. Everything changed, even to the stone on Justin's grave. It was as if lightning had struck and had writ there in letters of fire, just as happened once on Sinai.

Chapter 2

IT was little we knew that night as we came from church what it was that awaited us between the Allt and Trewern. Looking back now, I might have known that because it was late October it was time for the old wheel to start turning again. That is how it is with me. The days never shorten but I feel I am on the outset of some new journey. And the pattern of my days proves it, too. It was at the turn of the year that I fell in love with Grett, and late harvest it was when we married. Then, within a month, Justin died, and come Calan Gaeaf four years afterwards and Sabel was born. And though my birthday comes round in high summer, you have only to count back and you see how the thumb-print of winter has been on me right from the very start.

But to get back to that night. There we were, as I say, a roadful of us coming home from church. Behind us the hunter's moon was round and full above the Vans and our shadows went before us as we walked. It was only a half-hour before that we had stood in a half-ring facing Lewsin the Post. Full of music as ever was Lewsin and he would have it that the tenors were not coming in on the beat in the anthem we were practising for the Thanksgiving. Father, as usual, would not give an inch. To settle the argument there and then, Lewsin's pitchfork glinted blue in the moonlight, and there they were: Grett and Sabel taking the soprano, mother the alto, and Lewsin and Dico Lewys the bass. Father, of course, took the tenor, Moc chinning in with him. Myself I did not sing. Not that I had no ear

for music. Indeed, it was¹ nothing for me to think of a Handel chorus and to hear every part in it, clean and clear. But when it came to singing together, I could never hold my own without coming in with the treble. Even so, there was something fine and grand in listening to the others. When before, so I wondered, had the old Allt heard an anthem sung there at night. Other sounds they were that the oaks and larches knew. And soon, any day now, there would be only the tumult of the wind here and the crying of the rain. True, there had been singing along this same road when Grett and I got married. But to think of the singing traploads that had followed us to the wedding breakfast was only to remember how, in less than a month afterwards, there had been the measured tramp of feet along the road with Elias carpenter calling 'Change!' as the bearers took Justin's weight one from the other. . . .

"There you are! What did I tell you?" Lewsin clapped his hands for a halt. "It is you, Daniel Peele—just like I said. Not coming in on the beat you are. Watch the beat, man. One . . . two . . . and in you come."

"Nonsense! Let me see the copy."

"See the copy?" Lewsin cocked a sarcastic eye at father, his bowler halving the moon. "Diain, Daniel, what good is a copy now? Dazz it all, you had the copy bang under your nose in the practice . . . But perhaps you can see better in moonlight than by oil lamp! No, no, Dan. Two beats it is. You try it again. Ready? Chord then!"

The pitchfork pinged again against his upturned heel. The anthem went now with a swing, and I marvelled when they came to it, that father admitted his mistake and came in with Lewsin's hand. Mother was against the moon and I could only see the frail shape of her, but Grett was in the full light of it. Say what you will, it is when a woman is of forty that her real beauty shows through. Then it is



that the fine structure and mould of bone begins to show through. Before then there is the glow of skin and velvet fullness, as was the case with Sabel now. Poor Sabel! Although she was singing for all she was worth—and a sweet little soprano she was, even in tone whether high or down in the middle register—I knew how she was feeling. It had been as much as we could do to get her to come home with us this night. Moc had even threatened that if Matt Felindre persisted in following her he would take a hand in it himself. Not that I had anything much against Felindre. It was what people would say, if they were not talking already. I didn't blame him at all. No doubt Sabel was as much to blame as he was, but there was no getting away from the fact that he was nearly twice her age. One or the other of them was bound to suffer in the end.

A few minutes afterwards, and Lewsin and Dico went off across the fields, Lewsin still conducting as he went along.

I fell behind the others with Moc, content to let them go. By the time we'd get in, the women would have got supper ready. Besides, the road was steep and good it was to turn every now and again to look back at the Vans. The old rocks were part of me. That is how it is when you live year in, year out, with a rock or a tree. You become part of it. It was good, too, as I looked at the dark symmetry of the distant rocks to think of the winter I was ready for it. A hoyden is the summer with a blush in the morning and no knowing how long her mood will last. But with the winter you know where you are and what to expect. And the great thing this year was that we were ready for it. The harvest had been good, and for once our Thanksgiving would be no mockery. Many were the years when vicar had had to gloss over the crops that were still black and soggy on the stubbled fields. But our barns this year were tight to the rafters, and the round ricks behind the house were like clenched fists against the wet hole in the west.



Let the winds come, I said to myself, and let the frosts be hard and bitter and the spring as tardy as it likes—our barns were full and nothing could touch us more! Yet even as the words formed themselves in my mind, I stretched out my hand to touch a gate post as we went by. It was only a week or so back that vicar had preached about the wise fool and his barns. . . . But touching wood that night did not help and I know now what a vain boast it was that I made. People will have it that we tempt Providence when we are too sure of ourselves and that the Almighty do sometimes stretch out His hand to bring us to heel. Nevertheless, it was not my boast that caught up with me that night. Hour by hour, day by day, ever since the night of the Brecon fair back in '87, we had each one of us been moving nearer and nearer to what was in store for us the next minute.

It was Moc who saw him first. We had almost caught up with the others when he turned suddenly and looked back down the road. For a moment I wondered what it was he had heard or seen. And then I saw him. Someone was coming up the road behind us, now in shadow, then half in moonlight. I peered hard to see who it might be; and the thought flashed through me that it was Matt Felindre padding after Sabel. Then, as he came nearer, I saw that I was mistaken. My legs went weak under me, and I clutched at Moc's arm to steady myself. It was as though the grave had opened and Justin himself were coming towards us. At my side I heard Moc's startled oath and knew that he, too, had recognized him.

Chapter 3

THE young fellow was now almost level with us and because of the terror that was on me, I backed into the shadow of the hedge to let him pass. I was still trembling. It was as though the earth had given a lurch and a jolt under me, like a gambo floor when the mare moves forward and you are unprepared for it. Then, as the young fellow came up to us, he stopped and looked at Moc and me without saying a word. How long it was that we stood there looking at one another and not saying a word, I don't know. More than likely it was not more than a second or so. But as far as I was concerned, time no longer counted. The twenty-odd years that had passed since Justin's death were no more than the flick of an eyelid. I looked around me wildly, wondering if I was dreaming. But no dream it was. There below me was the dark mass of the Allt, tangled, impenetrable, and as still as the grave. There, too, were the Vans; for once far, far away and having no part in me.

"Good night." Moc's voice was cool enough, with no invitation behind it to make conversation.

The young fellow just gave a slow, non-committal side nod in answer to Moc's greeting. From the tail of my eye I could see he was well made and standing some five-nine or so. The next second and here was the old man coming back to see who it was we were talking to.

"This the road to Trewern?"

A shiver went through me at the young fellow's words. So it was Trewern he was bound for, but I still refused to

admit the truth to myself. His Welsh was, I noticed, a little different from ours. As far as I could place it there was a Brecon twang to it, though pure enough for all that. An adjudicator would have described it as a 'dark' voice. It came hard-edged and straight from the chest. I realized, too, that he was not afraid to hear his own voice. With us, especially in front of strangers, we tended to drop our voices as though afraid to hear ourselves.

"Asking for Trewern you are?" The old man pushed forward. He seemed to fill the road.

"Aye, Trewern. The Peeles live there, don't they?"

"Be something wrong if they didn't!" The old man's laugh was dry and on the edge of his teeth.

"Then . . . you are——?"

"Aye. Daniel Peele, that's me. Daniel Peele of Trewern. Were you wanting to see me now?"

"No . . . not particularly."

"No?" The old man was now on his mettle, his voice a deal too soft and quiet. "Well? What is your business then?"

He looked the young fellow up and down as though he were at a hiring fair. Then, his voice still quieter as he peered forward from under the brim of his square-crowned bowler: "I . . . I don't know you, do I?"

"No . . . I don't suppose you do."

"Stranger here, is it?"

"Aye. Tree-felling, over at the Fagddu Woods."

So Allt-Y-Fagddu was being felled! I fancied I could feel the axes biting into the great oaks. They would be at our own roots, too.

"Well, well! So you are tree-felling, eh. Over at Allt-Y-Fagddu . . . Not thinking of felling this old Allt of yours are you? Eh?"

"No. Do you want to sell?"

"Not to your sort, gwas. A bit deep you are. Don't give much away, do you?"

"What do you want to know?"

"Look, my boy——" Father peered at him again, and for the life of me I could not make out how it was he had not recognized him. For myself, I could hardly bring myself to look at the young fellow. Still dazed, I heard question follow question, and more than once I looked anxiously up the road afraid that mother would take it into her head to come and see what was keeping us. Then, at last, after some speng of the old man's, the young fellow half turned and pointed at Moc and me.

"Right, Mr. Daniel Peele. So you don't believe in peeling eggs, as you say. No more do I neither. Asked for it you have, so don't blame me. If you want to know who I am, then just ask them two behind you if they remember Brecon fair night, back in '87. Ask 'em if they remember The Coracle pub, an' a girl named Teg Powell."

Father turned and looked enquiringly at Moc and me. But I could say nothing and only nodded my head in desperate affirmation. I think the old man knew then, for I saw how his jaw stiffened, his lips set in a thin, hard line so as not to show his hurt. I stared past him in the direction of the church. But Justin was not there any more. Something bestial and ugly had come between us and him . . . Teg Powell! So her name was Powell. There was no doubt in my mind any more. But father was at it again:

"Your name now, gwas? Out with it! Nothing to be ashamed of, is it?"

"No, nothing to be ashamed of. Suits me better than 'Peele', anyway. Powell's the name, if you want to know. Jasper•Peele Powell. . . .

I let them talk on. What were words now! As if I was in a soc and with my brain like a black whirlpool, I heard him say that his mother was dead; and for all the pain in

me, I was glad that that was one complication the less. So his mother was Teg! The scene on that night in The Coracle came back to me as real, and alive as if I was back there again. I could see Justin on the floor and there standing over him was Dai Robert the boxer. Then came Justin's rally and Moc's exultant curse as Dai went down under a hail of blows to the head and body. And there too was the girl Teg who had started the brawl, her hair unpinned and her blouse half out of her skirt. No wonder it was that Justin had gone outside with her when the fight was over. I remembered, too, how he had afterwards described everything to me, omitting no detail . . .

I looked up suddenly, realizing that father and Jasper had stopped talking. There, not ten yards away was mother. I looked imploringly at Jasper. Mother was leaning forward, Grett and Sabel on each side of her. She peered at us, smiling politely because she could not see too well and not wishing to appear short-sighted. With that, Jasper turned quickly and went back down the road without saying a word. Mother looked from each of us to the other. The old man shook his head warningly at Moc and me, and motioned us to fall behind. Then, taking mother's arm from Grett, he walked her slowly away from us.

"What is it?" whispered Grett.

I could only shake my head. All I wanted now was to be alone.

"But what's happened, Ned? You look as if you'd seen a ghost."

"You go with mam," I told her. "Something terrible has happened . . . Go on, now. You and Sabel . . . Moc an' me'll be along in a few minutes."

She went quietly enough did Grett, and I blessed her that she asked no further questions.

How father would begin to tell mother I could not imagine. Jasper Powell! I smiled bitterly to myself. Call

himself Powell or what he would, it made no difference. To us he was Justin's son. The parish naturally would have another name for him. I could already imagine the malicious glee. Soon, the knobbled, blue-nailed fingers would be pointing at us once more; and this time there was no Justin behind us to give us backbone.

Chapter 4

Moc had the good sense that night to keep quiet as we walked along. No doubt he felt the same as I did for he was one of us by now. He was perhaps nearer to mother than one of us. It was nothing out of the way to come home from Mart of an evening and to find the two of them up in Justin's old room. Mother had kept his things just as he had left them. His clothes were still heavily camphored against the moth, and what little treasures he had had were carefully wrapped in tissue. All that Moc had asked for as a keepsake was the tweed cap which Justin had bought on the night of that Brecon fair and had worn for the last time when he jumped down to Jeff Ellis's aid in Alltwen barn. Naturally, Moc wore it only on special occasions. For funerals he still had the wide brimmed bowler which he had bought when Justin died.

I glanced down at him as we took the long way home so as to give father time to tell mother and the others. His broken-nosed profile was like a chipped boulder. Once or twice he grinned to himself and threw me a questioning glance as if expecting me to say something. But I had nothing to say. Something had died inside me, and it was more than I dared to think of the scene at home. Time and again, when I thought Moc was not looking, I crossed myself and prayed the shock would not be too much for mother. I thought, too, of Grett. What, I wondered, would have been my feelings if it had been Jeff's and not Justin's bastard who had turned up like this. And bitter

it was to have to admit to myself that something small and spiteful in me would have leapt in secret joy at the news. But Grett, glory be, Grett was different. She was real through and through was Grett and I knew in my heart how she would feel for us.

At last, skirting the Allt, we came to the Lyswen. So the river was still singing and the taste of the night air was sweet and clean because of the bite of the hoar frost under the glistening alders. So had it flowed, I thought, on the night when father and I walked down to Dolguog to fetch Pali to lay out Justin, though to be sure on that night everything had been touched and numbed by the grief that was on us. That is how it is. There is nothing but sympathy all around you when you are in grief. The trees sigh and the heavy clouds weep. But with shame, there is nothing but mockery on every side.

We stood by the Lyswen for some time. Moc dug out a cigarette stump from his inside pocket and made me take it. For all its charred staleness, I inhaled it gratefully. Then, as is the way with me, I found myself thinking of things that were really of no importance and had little bearing on the trouble that was come to us. How would we be feeling, I wondered, a year from now. No need there was to make a note of the date. Another black October this was for us. And once again I found myself marvelling how the pattern showed through from time to time. A dark old sampler it was that showed our history. Where, I asked myself, had this line of the Peeles started. As far as the records went, and cut rudely enough they were in the lichened row of stones that sloped, some this way, and others that way, behind the church, the parish had always been our home. One we were with the Vans, with Sawdde, Blaen Ddol, Tychrug; and one too with Allt-Y-Fagddu . . . First in line behind the church was Absolon Peele and Dwynwen his wife. Then followed Jabin Peele

and Sarah. And there's strange it was that the Peeles had always gone to the Bible for male names, the saving touch of grace it was perhaps that mitigated so much lawlessness and earthy lust. Then, towards the end of the line, came the grave of Justin Ddu my grandfather—Black Justin as he was known because of his beard and terrible rages. And then, last of all so far, under the slab which we had thought would cover and contain him so securely, was Justin my brother. There they were—the line of the Peeles. Soon, it would be father and mother; someday, myself, Grett, Sabel. . . . But for Jasper I could see no place at all. Enough to make the Peeles rise it would be to have a bastard in their midst!

Justin's bastard! The thought tore through my mind like a jagged edge. And it was less than an hour before that I had spoken to him!

I looked up and across Maesyrrarian fields, blue and pallid as they were under the moon with the hedges at the far end like spears and banners against the sky. Jasper would now be walking back to the Tavarn. It was fitting, I thought, that a son of Justin's should be staying at the Tavarn. A rough crowd they would be, too. We had had wood-fellers here before. There would be trouble now again, too; no two ways there were about that . . . And this time we would be caught up in it ourselves. It was just what Rhys blacksmith, Lloyd Parri and the rest of them had been waiting for. Full time it was, as far as they were concerned that Trewern should be brought down a peg and humbled. When Justin was alive no one except Jeff Ellis had ever threatened our sway. The old man, of course, still lived on his reputation. He was still too ready to threaten with his fist or stick, and it was ever my dread that someday he would go too far and be taken at his word. But now, at last, we were open and defenceless. And worse than anything they could do to us, they could now

hurt Justin. It was that, I think, that hurt more than anything.

I turned to Moc. He was the only one of Justin's stamp left with us now.

"Moc?"

"Aye?" He spat from the corner of his mouth and grinned up at me.

"What do you make of it, Moc?"

"Make of it? Diawl, Ned, I don't know what to think . . . What's the good of thinking anyway. He gave me a shock mind, I can tell you. Thought I had the bloody D.T.s or something."

"I know . . . But how do you feel about it?"

The grin suddenly left his face and his heavy hand gripped my shoulder.

"Diawl, Ned, he's Justin's son. That's all there is to it, and what's more, I'm with him all the way. Don't forget, he's a Peele for all that bloody 'Powell' talk of his. Just remember that."

"But he'll have nothing to do with us!"

"Huh! Young blood, Ned! But don't you worry. The old blood will out in time." He grinned again. "There'll be some fun, too, unless I'm mistaken. He won't find it easy here. He's the sort that'll go looking for trouble. And he'll get it, too. Come to the right place he have for that. But he'll manage, he'll manage." Moc gave a confident, confirmatory wink. "Just the boyo he is for that. Did you see the way he carried hisself?"

"Don't lap!" I cut Moc short. He could only see the light side of it. "How do you think the old people are going to take it?"

Moc frowned and thrust out his thick underlip. "You mean the disgrace an' all that, because he's a bastard?"

I nodded.

"It's going to kill mother," I said. "You know what she is——"

"Flaming hell!" Moc stubbed out his cigarette and thrust what was left of the butt into his pocket. "Talking like a crot you are." He stopped and looked me straight in the eye, the shadow from the peak of his cap cutting his face in half. "It is you that is doing the worrying, Ned, just like you always do. Just let the old people do their own worrying; they'm more used to it than you. They'll face up to it, don't you worry. They got to. Anyway," he took out his turnip of a watch and looked at the time, "if you are so concerned about the way they are taking it, it's time we was going. Come on, and stop becsing."

Somehow or other I caught something of his mood. Trast Moc to see things just as they were. It was romantics like myself who were forever seeing both sides of the picture. That was the trouble with both mother and me. We were always worrying and concerning ourselves through seeing the other person's point of view. Moc, father, and so had Justin in his day, regarded things squarely. And here was I afraid that people would sneer at Justin's memory. As if anything could ever hurt Justin! Alive, he would have damned them all, would even have gone out of his way to provoke a sneer from them . . . As Moc had said, here Jasper was, and there was nothing we could do about it.

Then, as we walked along, I suddenly caught the smell of the earth, the river, and the biting tingle of the rusted hedges. It was something I had missed for years. Years of smoking, perhaps, had dulled the membranes of my nostrils. But now, I inhaled again, and felt again the thrill and excitement which I had known when my first love for Grett was so intoxicating and wild in me. I looked up at the dark, wooded side of the valley rising up to Trewern. The old contours were the same as they had

been when I had walked home this way after being with Grett. I was seeing them again after twenty years. There was not a tree or flash of moonlit water that was not familiar to me. So I was alive again. The old wheel was beginning to turn. And full time it was that it should start turning again! But as we came up the steep slope leading to Trewern, and I saw the firs around the house, my mood changed again. It was as if the old trees were lifting their hands against me. All the way up from the river everything had been full of life and movement, but here everything was still and silent, as though numbed with shock and pain. Then, as the white-washed walls of the outbuildings grew brighter and brighter as we neared them, so my steps became slower and slower. I felt as if every stone in the old place was crying out because of the shame contained behind it. My eyes bored through the thick walls, and in my mind I could hear mother crying and calling on Justin to say it was not true.

I turned mutely to Moc. He nodded grimly in understanding; then, taking me by the arm, his fingers digging into my flesh, he half led me through the yard and up to the door.

Chapter 5

I SAW as soon as I entered the kitchen that mother knew everything. The pity was that she was not crying. Better by far, I thought, if she could have cried. All she did was to beat her fist on the table, softly and despairingly, as though knowing how futile was any wild demonstration of anger or anguish. She had sat in exactly the same way on that night when she and I had waited for the ruffian of the gambo that was to bring Justin's body home. The old man, for once, seemed lost in his big arm-chair. His eyes were desperate with impotent anger. To give some vent to his feelings he looked resentfully across at mother ready, as I took it, to speng at her for the way she was taking it all. Sabel and Grett looked anxiously at Moc and me as we stood just inside the door; Sabel for once subdued and pale, and Grett keeping her place as though she were not one of the family. It was as if everyone had become lifeless.

I crossed over to the fireplace where the big iron kettle was coughing dryly and swung the crane over to the tarred hob.

"Mistress!"

At the sound of Moc's voice, mother's lips began to tremble.

He crossed over to her and put his great hand on her shoulder. Then, slowly, and magnified by her thick lenses, tears started to well over her eyelids and trickle down her face. I could only stand there watching her. But when she put out the tip of her tongue to arrest a heavy tear, I

turned away. I felt as though I could taste the very salt of it.

Moc said nothing for a minute or so, but stood there with his hand still on her shoulder and let her cry herself out. As I looked at him and saw him frown and grimace with his heavy lips I feared for a moment that he would break down himself. But I was wrong there. Temper it was with Moc now, and no mistake:

“Mistress! Mistress!”

His voice startled us all. He had never shouted like this in the house before. We all looked at him wondering what it was had come over him. I heard the startled gulp in mother’s throat as she swallowed a sob and looked up at him.

“Uffern dân!” It was the first oath he had ever used in front of mother. But worse was to come. “Is it off your heads you are, or what?” His small pig eyes looked angrily at us. “Diawl, anybody’d think someone had been killed. Riverging you are. That’s what it is, riverging . . .” He paused and wiped his mouth with the side of his thumb as if he was in a fight. “Riverging—blaspheming,” he went on, “nothing but blaspheming. Thinking about Justin, aren’t you? Don’t like the idea that he brought a bastard into the world—that’s what’s worrying you. Now just you listen to me and stop white-washing him. What do you think Justin was? A bloody saint?”

“A saint!” The old man’s bile came out in his laugh. Mother looked reproachfully at him. Moc nodded grimly.

“Aye, mishtir, a saint. That’s what you’ve all been making of him ever since he went. And now that you find out he was only human an’ left a son behind him, what do I see? Nothing but wepps all round. Look at you!”

We were all a little self-conscious as he looked at us each in turn.

“What do you expect us to be, then?” The old man

frowned. "Expect us to be glad about it? P'raps you'd like me to kill the fatted calf, is it?"

Moc waved his argument aside: "Diain, you knew what Justin was, didn't you? As long as he had his fun it was good luck to him and the more fool the girl, never mind who she was. Right? Then face up to it now. That girl in Brecon clicked. That's all. And if you ask me, it is lucky you are he didn't leave a dozen behind him, not just one; and well you know it, too."

He pulled up short at that. Sabel's eyes shone as she looked across at him, her blouse lifting with each breath she took. The old man opened and closed his fist as though gauging his strength for whatever it was that lay ahead of us. As mother looked up at Moc, he gave her an emphatic, reassuring wink. There was more colour in her cheeks now.

"That's better, mistress!" Down came his hand on her shoulder again. "Now's the time to show your kidney. Don't tell me you are going over to the other side."

"What . . . what side, Moc?"

"With them that thrives on clets and gossip. Oh, aye, don't you worry," out came his under-lip again, "there'll be plenty of that, make no mistake. But you've had that before . . . All right then, let them come!" He clenched his fists and half postured as if in the ring, his left foot extended and tapping the floor. Then, recovering himself, he half grinned and looked bashful. "If only old Justin was here now!" He suddenly laughed and slapped his thigh. "Him and his boasting about timing——"

He stopped. This time he had gone too far. The old man shook his head disapprovingly, and Sabel tried to look as though she was ignorant of his meaning. And that, I think, was the turning point.

After that we put our heads together, and it was well after eleven before the old man looked significantly at the

clock and asked if we were to have any supper. And typical it was of him and Moc that when it came they made a good supper, though for the rest of us we could only pick at our food. Mother was all for father and me to ride over to the Fagddu woods the next day to see Jasper. But as father said, it was no good running after him. Jasper knew where to find us; and if he was anything like Justin it would be useless trying to force him. Sabel was full of questions and I was all the time in a sweat of fear that she would start asking about Teg. There was, after all, a limit to what mother could stand in one night. Indeed, I was afraid that this mood of exhilaration and fight that had come on us with Moc's outburst would be gone as soon as the morning came cold over the Vans. How, I wondered, would we awaken after this night's sobering sleep. It would be one time, I feared, when our customary glance in the direction of the church would serve only to salt the hurt that was only partly salved.

At last, and by now the foxes were barking down in the Allt and the owls were loud around the house, the old man got up and slipped off his boots without bending. Then, as though to close this day, he walked over to wind the clock. Mother took down a brass candlestick from the mantelpiece and held it to what fire was left in the grate, tapping the candle mechanically against the top bar so that the grease should not spill on her polished fender. Then as she made to follow father upstairs, she crossed over to where Justin's photograph hung between the dresser and the parlour door. An enlargement it was, taken from an old photograph we had found of him when we went through his things. Elias carpenter had put his best work into the oak frame that was round it. And there's strange it was that Elias should have made it from the very stump that Justin had yanked out of the bog under the Waun. A lump of black oak it was, seasoned with age, mud and water.

and as hard as iron. Eliás had sworn it had ruined his best tools to turn it to his liking.

As for the photograph, Justin had been taken looking straight at the camera, and it must have been a year or two before his death when he still had his beard. Because we had lived with this likeness of him for over twenty years, it was like this we remembered him. The beard had suited him, too. Close-cropped and trim he had kept it, almost blue-black as I remembered it, matching his eyes.

The candlestick trembled a little as mother held it up to the picture. I could see the smear on the glass where she had kissed it since it was last cleaned. Yes, there he was: Justin Peele. And it was the same now as when he was alive. You felt you could forgive him anything once he grinned at you with those blue eyes of his. He had had the knack of looking straight at you had Justin, no trace of self-consciousness on his face whatever he had done. More than likely, he had been as full as a cask when the photograph was taken. Naturally, we had had to cut away the girl whose waist he was clasping before we could have the enlargement made. Who she was we never found out.

Suddenly, before I realized quite why I did it, I lifted my hand and held it horizontally in front of his face so that it blocked out the moustache and beard. All I could see now were his eyes and the hair combed away from the side parting. No, there was no doubt about it. It was now Jasper's face that mocked me, just as it had done an hour or so before at the bend of the Allt. As the old man had said at supper—all the proof we needed was in his face.

I turned to mother, and, as if reading my thoughts, because deep inside me I was wondering how long we could keep up this brave front of ours, she smiled at me. I knew then how she was suffering. With some people it is a frown, a pout, or a puckering about the eyes that gives them away. The old man had only to open and close his

fist and you knew he was on the boil. With Grett it was her quietness, and Sabel's whole nature was in the flash of her eyes. But with mother it was always her smile, especially if she was cut to the quick or hiding a hurt. The same it was, I remember, when Grett and I were ready to drive away to Nantiarad after Justin's funeral. I had dreaded the moment of departure for days. It was then, I knew, that mother would feel really alone. Then, when Grett was in the trap, I turned to mother: "You'll be all right now," I had said, trying a little false encouragement to give her backbone. "Moc will be here with you and father, and Grett or me'll be over to see you every day." It was then she had raised her face, her mouth quivering and her eyes streaming. "Go on, now," she even gave me a little push. "I'll be all right . . . Got to live your own lives you and Grett have. Don't you worry about me. I am all right. See, I am smiling." And terrible it had been to see her smiling with her face twisted and her eyes so desperate behind the old glasses. And so it was now again.

After they had all gone upstairs, I went outside to lock up the fowls and geese. Myddfai mountain, the Vans, and Tychrug stood out clean-edged against the sky. Yet, even so, I felt they were strange and alien to me. . . . How much better, I thought, if all this had happened when Jasper was born. Inured to grief we were then, and another blow would have made little or no difference to us. Moreover, had we known of his existence then, we might have arranged to bring him up. He would have grown up with us, and towards a child who could have held any resentment or abhorrence!

I stayed outside until one after the other, the lights were doused upstairs. The moon was now right overhead. Peace lay on the parish, but for how long I could not guess.

Chapter 6

As I had feared, the morning made us wish it was dark so that we could hide our faces. And the days that followed were such that I had never experienced before. You have only to put yourself in my place and think what it would be like if the same thing had happened to you. And don't forget, to us there had never been anyone like Justin. Even so, bitter as was our sense of shame and loss, for Justin was now removed far from us, a blessing it was that we had no hint or guess of what was yet to come. As it was, the autumnal glory of the afternoons mocked us with their tender melancholy and come tea-time the sunset down over Tychrug would fan out and flame like a royal road to heaven.

We did not one of us have the face to go down to the village. Moc even kept away from the Tavarn. Then, as the news got round, squire came over at once, vicar with him. Dico Lewys came too, and Elias, Talsarn, Prosser Ty Unnos, and others. But all they could do was to tell us it was no fault of ours, and that if Justin were alive it would only have been a nine days' wonder.

Naturally, we got all the gossip from Lewsin the Post. Yet eager as we were to know what was going on and how people were talking, we dreaded his visit and tried to find some excuse to be away from the house when he arrived. But there was no escaping the gossip. There were high jinks every night in the Tavarn again. The wood-fellers ruled the roost there and there was talk of how they were making free with the young girls about the dark lanes.

Then, as Calan Gaeaf came on—for us the onset of winter was ever the November calend—so the weather changed. Before the Sunday came round the old Allt was groaning and crying with the wind in it, and now that the moon had waned the nights came on us like pitch with the lanes bogged and the hedges dripping with rain. And then, on the Saturday morning, the old man shaved straight after breakfast and changed into his best clothes. We all looked to one another at first, wondering where he was going so swankus. And then the truth dawned on me. So he was going over to Allt-Y-Fagddu after all! That was why he had dressed with such care though the rain was coming in grey drifts from the Vans, and times the old house shook as the wind caught it full and square. But typical of the old man it was to turn out like this. According to him there was a definite advantage in being better dressed and groomed than the other man, especially if there was friction between them. Many were the times when he had looked disparagingly at me if I hadn't shaved for a day or two, as would happen mid-week. Nor was it any use for me to protest that because I was fair no one would notice it. "Forgetting you are," he once told me—it was just after Grett and I had moved back here—"forgetting you are that it's back at Trewern you are now. If you are not careful you'll have Rhys blacksmith and that set calling you 'Ned'. Never heard them 'Daniel' me, have you?" As I say, he had his pride, and never once did I see him out anywhere but that his black coat was brushed free of dandruff and his collar like snow. But on this morning as he rolled out of the yard, his square-crowned bowler firm on his head and tilted forward against the rain, his leggings had lost their shine before he had gone through the gate.

We were with him every yard of the way that morning, and pathetic it was to see how another had changed into

her second best in the hope that he would bring Jasper back with him. She made Grett and Sabel change too, but Moc and I cleared out into the barn. It was more than I could bear to see how she watched the clock and turned eagerly to the window each time the dogs barked. Far better, perhaps, if we had told her what Lewsin had told us the day before. As it was she knew nothing of how Jasper had been shouting the odds against us up at the Tavarn. No doubt, it was because he had said he would make us wish we had never seen or heard of him that father had ridden over this morning.

To kill time, I suppose, Moc started fiddling with the horse-power, taking the wheels out and oiling the cogs in readiness for the threshing. For once I let him get on with it, though the chances were, that in the end, I would have to help him put it together again. He had been tinkering with an old clock for years and it was nothing unusual for Grett or Sabel to find an odd wheel here and there when they scrubbed out his room. As for myself, I lay back against the wall of hay that rose sheer to the roof. Though the hay was as brown and sweet as demarara, an occasional whiff from it was enough to make you think it was summer again. But such fancies lasted only for an instant. The beat of the rain was steady on the slates and as I glanced up through the half-door I could see nothing but the sycamores, pliant and half bent before the drive of the wind.

I looked at my watch. No doubt the old man was now approaching the Fagddu woods. He would have heard the dull bite of the axes as soon as he w^h's through the Dyfnant. I only hoped the rain had not interfered with the work and kept the tree-fellers at the Tavarn. But that was nonsense. The woods had to be cleared before the sap['] would start rising again. Besides, what was a strem of wind and a scud of rain to men whose job it was to grapple with oaks and who handled their axes as though they were playthings!

A strange feeling of pride rose inside me as I realized that theirs was a job worthy of Justin's breed, and in a way I began to wish the old man had asked Moc and me to go with him. Still, there it was. If it came to hard words he would hold his own better on his own than if we were with him. Also, he might not have wished us to witness his discomfiture if things did not go the way he had planned them.

Yes, he would be coming to the Fagddu woods now. The Fagddu Woods—Allt-Y-Fagddu! Though I was safe and dry here in the barn, I felt as if the old forest was stretching out its gnarled fingers to gather me to it. The very sound of the name always went over me like cold water. I had dreaded the place ever since I could remember. When I was a boy I used to think that the sun was afraid to pierce its fastness and that once the wind got lost in it, it whined and cried like a child in fright. That old Allt-Y-Fagddu. Oh, the names of the old parish! The Dyfnant valley, Allt-y-brain, Cwm Andreas, and so on. They breathed the very substance of the red soil, and generations of fear and superstition had clung to them so that they were palled in gloom and terror. I had only to think of them and immediately the spirit and mood of the place communicated itself to me. These, of course, were the dark places, for when it came to Cwmsidan, Ffynnonoer, Maesyrarian, and Cefn Melgoed, it was impossible not to think of them without hearing straight and clear the water speech of Sawdde, terrible in winter, naturally, but full of whispers and soft murmurs on an Eden morning in summer; shot they were then with kingfisher flashes and the bottle-green of the alders. . . . Blaen Ddol—and you saw the twin forests undulating over Myddlai mountain like two armies on the march. And then Rhos Dirion? A song was Rhos Dirion in itself. How could it be otherwise since, for me, it was a synonym for Grett—Grett Ellis as she was when we had courted in its dingles and known our bridal in its moist

ferje. But these, as I say, were the sun-speckled names. Of another brood was Allt-Y-Fagddu. Little wonder that as you rode by it on a winter's night you said the Lord's Prayer over and over, and looked fearfully over your shoulder as you went along. . . .'

I knew from the sound of Doll's hoofs coming back down the lane that father's journey had come to nothing. All he did when he got stiffly down from the saddle and handed the reins to Moc was to purse his lips and shake his head. He was wet to the skin, his breeches black with rain and his starched collar limp and stained around his neck.

He said nothing while mother got him his change of shirt and drawers, and aired them in front of the fire. Then, at last, after he had changed, turning his back to us as he did himself up, we got the story bit by bit from him. Mother had to bite her tongue more than once to keep her patience with him. Nevertheless, she knew better than to hurry him. One thing, however, was certain. Jasper would have nothing to do with us. All he had asked was that he should be left alone. Then, when father had asked him what were his plans, he said that if the parish could put up with him, he could put up with them—"Let 'em say or call me what they like," he had said, "but not when I'm about." As for his plans, he would be here as long as the job lasted. Before leaving him, the old man had hinted that he was ready to pay him what we owed him, if it was only what would normally have come to Justin, had he lived. He had laughed at that and told father to keep the stud fee. Worse than that though, he had added something about Justin, too. What it was the old man would not say, but I could tell that it had cut deep, and still did. He ate his dinner as if there was no taste or flavour to it, and when he swallowed it was with a heavy

gulp. He gave a thin, contemptuous smile as Moc started muttering what he would do if ever Jasper started blacking Justin in his hearing. When he had finished his food, he pushed the chair back with his legs, rasping the ferrules on the smooth flagstones—a sure sign that he was full of the devil. If there was anything mother could not stand, it was for one of us to rasp the chair legs on her floor. Today, however, she seemed not to notice it.

“What . . . what do we do now then?” Her upper lip, always so naked, was trembling again. Whenever she was upset or worried you could see her whole being gathered there in a little pout. “If he won’t have anything to do with us, what can we do?”

“Do?” The old man’s chest swelled out for a moment above the heavy hang of his stomach. “Diain, I’ve done all a man can do! I shouldn’t have gone to see in the first place, that’s all. The more fool me for listening to you. Just wait till it gets round that I been running after him. Me!”

“Not afraid of that are you, mishtir?” Moc held the old man’s eyes as he looked up at him.

“Afraid! Me!” He showed his teeth. “You know me better than that, Moc. Let them talk . . . Enough dung there is for every fly to bust now.”

I realized that he was in his element. After all, this was life to him. He had been saying for years that there was no stomach left in the parish. I caught Grett’s eye and as she half winked at me, I saw that she, too, had realized the same thing. As long as the old man’s back bristled there would be no need to worry over what people would say. It wouldn’t take much either to ruffle mother’s feathers.

“Don’t worry!” For a second I thought the old man was referring to the sheet of corrugated that had just clattered down from one of the pigsty roofs; but he paid no heed to that.

“Don’t worry,” he repeated, as he leant down to lace up his leggings. “Gossip can’t hurt us, or him there——” He jerked his head to indicate Justin’s photograph. “And as for that . . . that ‘Jasper’ as he calls himself——” He looked up at us, his face mottled from the exertion of bending over his stomach: “Gossip won’t hurt him, neither . . . No mistaking his pedigree there is.” He got up and stamped his nailed boots to adjust the hang of his breeches. “Gave me as good as I gave him he did.” He nodded to himself and smiled to himself. “Reckon we’ll have to dock his tail when he comes round to our way of thinking.”

“You think he will then?” For a moment mother looked years younger.

“Think!” He laughed as he struggled into his jacket. “I know. Just you mark my words. One of us he is, bastard or no bastard. Plenty of kidney there, and the spit of Justin. But we got to give him time. Like father, like son. Got to play him careful we have. But he’ll come round, don’t you worry. Easy it is to light a fire on an old hearth, but don’t blow too hard at first. Young wood don’t catch at once.”

We sat around the fire for some time, not talking much but thinking hard about what the old man had said. Mother was full of hope as if she could already see a bright patch in the sky. For myself, I was not too sure. I still felt as though we were prisoners in our own home. But that, perhaps, was because the storm was so wild outside. Now and again the old house shuddered, and times I feared the walls, thick though they were, would not hold up against the blunt weight of the wind. After a while, however, a longing came on me to go out for a walk. I felt I needed a blow of wind and rain. Ever since the previous Sunday we had done nothing but mope and brood. Without saying a word, I went into the wash-house and tied a sack around

my middle, putting another over my shoulders. No water-proof could ever equal a good sack in the rain.

When I got to the first above the waun, they were like half hoops before the wind, and it was as much as I could do to keep my feet. But a wind it was that came vast and powerful from over the Vans and not a sad thought or fear could exist in the face of it. My cheeks were like running marble and for the first time since Jasper's coming to us, I felt I was in contact again with Justin. Once or twice I fancied I heard the sound of axes coming from the direction of the Fagddu woods. Nevertheless, I was wrong there, because the wind was coming from the opposite way. I could not even see the Fagddu for the clouds were scudding low and swollen up through the Dyfnant. But it made no difference whether I could see the woods or not. Anyway, it would soon be dark with only the whine of the wind in every tree and hedge. Yet dark or light, Jasper's presence was all round me. He was here in the parish. Justin's flesh and blood was here with us. That was it, and I had no doubt that the old man had realized it, too. The Peele name and breed would still be carried on. He was one of us, a male Peele.

I sang as I went along, my words making no sense; but to me there was satisfaction in shouting down the wind with the exultation that was on me. Justin was alive in Jasper. We were all of us alive again. Though we had not realized it, we had been dead too long, interred there with Justin under the blue slab that covered him.

It was dark long before I got back home; and though the sacks were like lead about me, I walked as on air and revelled in the presage of strife that got louder and shriller as the wind increased in force.

Chapter 7

THE Sunday evening found us all in church. But though it was the night of the Harvest Thanksgiving, I would have given anything if the old man had decided against us going. It had rained right through till after dinner and it looked as if the weather would be enough to keep us at home. But the wind dropped suddenly and the Vans lifted a purple shoulder through the thinning clouds. By tea-time you would have thought it was summer again though, to be sure, there was too much of the sky showing through the trees and hedges. Then, as though it was any other Sunday, the old man started to get ready as soon as tea was cleared, and by the time Moc and I came in from milking mother, too, was dressed. I could only wonder and marvel at them. It was only the night before that Moc had at last gone up to the Tavarn. The news he brought back was much what we expected. Everyone there was talking about Jasper and us. Moc had had it all from Tal Einon. Jasper, so it appeared, had gone off on a randyboo to Senny or Brecon, and the Tavarn was more or less quiet. But trouble had already broken out between the tree-fellers and the boys of the parish. Of course, that was not to be wondered at. Newcomers always made free with the girls. Somehow or other, young fellows from the towns had the idea that country girls were just theirs for the asking.

By the time we got to the kissing-gates they were already on the first psalm. Sabal went first, as lissom and straight

as a hazel in her tight hobble skirt and trim jacket, Grett on her heels. As I had expected, the church was packed to the doors, just as in the old days. And like the old days it was to feel again that every eye was turned on us as we tiptoed along to our pew. A good thing it was that we sat well up in front, with only the choir between us and the sheaves that had been placed against the altar. The psalm they were singing was the lovely sixty-fifth where it says about the clouds dropping fatness and the little hills rejoicing on every side. Every word in it rang so sweet and true, and I remembered how I used to think when I was small that the psalmist must have walked the Sawdde and known how the Vans and Myddfai mountain looked on an autumn day . . .

We stood up at once after bowing our heads. Still low church we were, and would be, too, as long as vicar, squire, and father had a say in it, though for myself I must say that many were the times when I felt like kneeling on the cold stones; and blessed too it would have been to walk to a service at midnight to take part in a candle-lit mass. Of course, easy enough it is for me to say such things now. Lucky indeed it was for me in their day that father and vicar never had a guess of the things that ran through my mind.

But to get back to the service that night. Now that I was there, I began to feel more myself. The old chant had me on its wing and never once did a thought of what people were thinking cross my mind as we went through it. My only regret was that we were not singing it to Poole in E flat. Wesley in G was all the go now, and a grand chant it was, especially on a summer's evening with all the women in their finery and the soft light from the coloured windows touching them with hyacinth and blue. But with me there could never be a chant like Poole's. It was part of the old church; and I had made Grett,

Sa\ el, and even mother promise that if ever anything happened to me before they went, it should be sung at my funeral.

Because of what Moc had told us of Jasper's excursion to Brecon or Senny, I was more or less easy in my mind. But when we came to the Gloria, I saw low vicar suddenly, looked over his glasses, his eyes startled and looking first at father and then apprehensively at mother. Something swept over the whole church, too. The singing flagged, and but for father and Dico it would have gone to pieces. There was no need for me to look round. I knew the step as surely as if it had been Justin himself who was clonking up the aisle.

He passed the end of our pew and walked straight to my old seat behind the altos and sopranos. He did not pretend to kneel or bow his head, but stood there until we finished the psalm. The gold and brass on the altar merged with the stacked sheaves and for a moment everything went blurred and hazy as if I was looking at them through mother's thick lenses. So he had come to church after all, and my prayers had been to no avail! I gripped the back of the pew in front of me to steady myself. There was still the Deus Misereatur to go through. Madlen Harries must have opened the swell on the little organ for it came in round and full, and there was father's voice catching like one with Edgar Wernlas. I looked across at him, wondering if he had seen Jasper come in. But, as usual, his face, bald-domed and smooth, gave no hint if he had seen or noticed anything. As for mother, I could not tell if she had seen him or not. She was in profile to me, sitting as usual with the altos, and all I noticed was that she had stopped singing. At my side Grett and Sabel stared at Jasper as though unable to believe their eyes.

How I sat through the service I don't know. The anthem they had practised went without a hitch; and worried as I

was, I marvelled that the old man was so composed and in such good voice. He came in on the debated beat, and even cocked an enquiring eye at Lewsin as he did so. Then, rising to the occasion as he always did, vicar preached in great hwyl. But the sermon meant nothing to me. Once, as I half turned in my seat, I caught Rhys blacksmith's eye. He looked the other way at once, but not before I had seen the half smile under his moustache. And Rhys was not the only one who smiled either. Of course, as was to be expected of him, for a real gentleman he was through and through, never mind if he was in his tailored greys or with a sack over his shoulders—squire kept his eyes fixed on vicar as if he was following the argument step by step. I saw Matt Felindre, too. He kept his eyes on Sabel all the time, but I was past thinking or caring about Matt or Sabel now. All I could think of was that it was Justin's son who was sitting there in my old seat. What there was of his mother in him I could not tell. All I could remember of Teg were her dark eyes and the half-uncovered flaunt of her breasts. No doubt she must have been a real beauty because, more often than not, it was the flashing ones who went that way and made free with fellows, especially if they were Justin's sort.

The lamp over the altar smoked and darkened one side of the glass. Even so, the stooked sheaves shone in the lamplight, more golden perhaps than they had ever done on the fields. Then, at last, vicar turned to the altar. As he gave out the hymns, Jasper looked straight across at us, his eyes sweeping from Grett and me to rest on Sabel.

The congregation filed out quietly enough but with not the customary talking in the aisle. They all seemed bent on getting outside as quickly as they could, no doubt to talk openly together about Jasper, and in the hope that something would happen. Some of the older members

looked the other way as they pushed past us, but others, heedless of what embarrassment we might be feeling, stared openly at us and lingered in the aisle making small talk, keeping us in the corner of the eye all the time. Sabel had pushed out past me immediately vicar gave the benediction. All I could do in answer to the look Grett gave me was to shake my head. Anyway, Sabel could look after herself, and my concern now was not for her or Grett. It was mother I was worried about. The old man, too, must have felt the same. For once he did not join the churchwardens. Instead, he crossed quickly to where mother was still sitting and helped her out of the pew. Somehow or other he seemed twice his usual size and his expression was, if anything, more hostile than ever. He met every glance directed at him as though daring each one who looked at him to provoke him, if only by as much as a smile. Mother, however, was paler than usual. Though she looked at Grett and me as she came up to us, I knew she was not seeing us. Then, as I took her arm, she came to the point at once:

“He is here, Ned, isn’t he?”

I nodded and looked towards the porch to see if there was any sign of him. He had hurried out before the people were out of their seats, his eyes looking straight ahead of him as he strode past us.

“I knew he was there,” mother went on. “I could feel everybody staring at me . . . He was sitting behind me, wasn’t he?”

“Aye. Just like his cheek it was to clump up right to the front,” said father. He turned aside for a second to half bow a little mockingly to the Deiri family as we squeezed past them. “Tried to stare me out he did. Me!” He laughed. “It was him that looked away first.”

There was a lifetime of knowledge behind mother’s rather sad but tolerant smile as she looked at the old man.

"Don't be childish, Daniel." She pulled at my arm to hurry me on. "I thought it was him," she whispered to me. "A nice bass he is . . . Not as heavy as Justin though . . . Do you think people knew who he was?"

Before I could answer her, Matt Felindre made to push by. He paused for a moment as though in two minds to speak. Then, no doubt, seeing how things were with us, he gave me a curt nod and passed on. Grett's face flushed and I saw how her nostrils tightened.

"Have you spoken to *him* yet?" asked father.

"Who?" I had no time for his spengs just now.

"You know who. Matt Felindre. Time you read him the riot act. People got enough to talk about already without——"

"Sabel can look after herself," said Grett quietly. "She'll soon get over Matt Felindre, trust her!"

"Hm." Father lifted his shoulders and smiled. "Let's hope it won't be too late, Grett. One bast——"

"Let Sabel be!" Mother did not turn her head as she cut him short. "If Felindre is what I think he is, he will respect her. Don't think the worst about everybody."

She lifted her hand to shade her eyes from the glare of the porch lamp. The acetylene light gleamed on the headstones outside.

"Where is he?" she whispered to me. "I must see him."

"You are going to speak to him?"

She shook her head.

"No . . . not in front of everybody . . . I . . . I only want to see him."

"But don't you care what people think?"

She looked at me as though I'd only just been breeched.

"Care? If gossip could kill, I'd have been where Justin is long ago."

The talking outside the porch stopped as soon as we came out. I looked around nervously and a feeling of relief

swapt over me as I saw no sign of Jasper. Alltybrain, the Birgwm, Rhys blacksmith and Lloyd Parri were bunched in a tight group, their smiles graven on their faces as they watched for our next move. Beyond them, just outside the Parish Room, the twin lamps of Danrallt's rubber-tyred trap gave a honey tinge to the white-washed walls. Mado Cadwalladr was already in his seat, Anne at his side, and Deuan anti Mattie in the back.

"Who is that over there?" Mother pointed with her umbrella along the path.

But it was only Matt Felindre. Even so, every nerve in me went taut as I realized that Sabel was not with him. Why was it, then, I asked myself, that she had hurried out as soon as the vicar had done. I looked across at Matt again and saw that he was staring past the buttressed end of the church, quite oblivious that we were looking at him.

I led mother on, father and Grett close behind us. Then, even as something inside me knew I would see them there, I saw Sabel and Jasper standing at Justin's grave. The light from the church window slanted down on them. I held mother's arm as firmly as I could without hurting her.

"Shall we go on?" I asked her.

"No, no . . ." She pulled back a little. "Not to-night . . ."

She turned away, and as she half stumbled over a hidden mound I heard her say Justin's name to herself. Then, when she had gone a few yards, she stopped and turned as though wanting to see him again. We were just in time to see Sabel's smile and nod as she hurried away from him to where Matt was still waiting for her. I put it down to Matt's credit that he did not appear to question her at all. Instead, he took her arm at once and walked down the path to the kissing-gates. Then, before one of us could say a word, Jasper came towards us. As I felt mother stiffen, I prayed he would not sneer or make small of her

in front of everybody. How she managed to hold up I don't know, because the sight of him coming towards us was as if Justin's grave had just opened.

He was almost level with us before he realized who we were. For a second he looked startled, and I saw how the old familiar frown that I remembered so well deepened between his eyebrows. He gave no sign of recognition though as his eyes swept over father and me. Then, as he stepped one side to pass us, he touched his hat to mother and Grett. I turned and watched him as he went straight through the group still standing under the porch light, not giving an inch but letting them make way for him. I listened hard, half afraid that someone would make an oblique comment, as was the way with them. But no one said a word, not even when the four of us passed by and went quietly towards the gates.

Chapter 8

ALL the way home that night, and light enough were our feet as we went down past Maesyfed and up under the Allt, mother was as proud as a pullet. From time to time she smiled to herself and smoothed her black kid gloves over her hands, and times she would look at father as if to say she had achieved something which he had failed to do. He, natural enough, was testy and short, feeling it, no doubt, that Jasper had ignored him. Somehow or other not one of us mentioned Sabel, but I noticed that more often than not I had to nudge Grett before she would reply to whatever I said to her.

At last, there were the old sycamores with the light from the kitchen window shining through them. I imagined Moc's face when we would tell him about Jasper. Then, as Sabel's shadow darkened the window, we hurried our steps in eagerness to hear what had passed between Jasper and her. The fact that she was home before us did not strike me at all, though in the months to come I went back to it time and again. Still, there she was, and already changed into a blouse and skirt so as not to crease her Sunday best. But now that we were face to face with her, a reticence came over us so that we were all of us, I think, afraid to hear what she had to say lest we should be disappointed.

She had laid the supper-table, and the chrysanthemums and Michaelmas daisies showed up rich and warm against the starched cloth and the blue china.

We had of late years kept a better table than when Justin

and I were boys. Then, in those days, it was always bacon, bread and cheese, broth every other day, and an occasional roast when we killed a fowl or a sheep. But now with three women in the house we had more variety. Sabel was for ever trying her hand at some fancy pastry or other; and though the old man cast a scornful glance at such 'frills' as he called them, saying that all a man needed was a wholesome cheese or fresh tart, he nevertheless did full justice to whatever she made. Indeed, if the tea or supper would be plain, as would happen about mid-week, baking-day being always on Friday, he would look with dismay at the table, and lift his eyebrows at Grett or Sabel.

Tonight, however, there was nothing he could grumble at. And there, open and face downwards where Sabel had left off reading it when we came in, was my old copy of Dafydd ab Gwilym. I picked it up at once and a pang went through me as I saw that it was open at one of Dafydd's most passionate poems to the dark-haired Dyddgu. So she was reading Dafydd ab Gwilym! I had no doubt either that she had seen the marginal notes I had made in the old book. I only hoped she had not been able to make head or tail of them because in those days I had recorded there every hour I had spent with Grett before our marriage, and a match they were, I'm afraid, to the wildest of Dafydd's amours . . . I held the open page at arm's length away to get the crabbed writing into focus. The next moment I slapped it to, and thrust it in my pocket. From now on it would be locked in my drawer upstairs. When I looked across at Sabel, I saw at once that she had read what I had written there. Her eyes shone with secret laughter.

"So you are back then." Grett was the first to speak. Mother was folding her veil carefully before putting it away with her gloves in the dresser drawer. Back went

Sabel's head and there, was the taut whiteness of her throat . . .

"I came straight home——" she began.

"I don't know what's come over you, Sabel," Grett looked reproachfully at her, and continued: "Going off with that Felindre in front of everybody. I've talked enough about it to you, and so has your father. You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"Why? Why should I?"

Sabel turned and crossed over to the sideboard, letting her eyes rest for a moment on her reflection in the mirror. Her skirt lifted a little with her movement and I saw how a briar or something had caught the mesh of her stocking.

"All right, all right! No argument now." I was surprised and hurt that Grett should have started on this while all we wanted to know was what Jasper had said to her. But there it was, Sabel was nearer to Grett than Jasper was to us. I turned to Sabel:

"What did he say to you—your cousin?"

Whether it was that I had used the word 'cousin' to her or not, I don't know, but her defiance vanished at once and a half smile came on her face. The light from the lamp picked out the specks of copper in her hair.

"Was it you spoke to him first?" I asked.

The colour rose to her cheeks as I looked at her and as she smiled a little guiltily she showed the small irregular tooth that was ever so little out of line with the others. Time and again she had threatened to get Rhys blacksmith pull it out for her, but to me it was part of her and only added to her loveliness.

"Of course . . . I just introduced myself to him."

I could well imagine their meeting. Trust Sabel to waste no time. I could see the dimpled smile and the redness of her lips as she would say: "I'm Sabel Peele . . ." Just that, the way she would say it with her eyes half

laughing and yet ready to flash at him if he tried to be high-handed with her.

"You spoke to him first!" Grett was doing her best to look outraged.

Sabel nodded. Looking at her you would have thought that the little stream of a minute ago had never been. But she was like that was Sabel, taking after mother and me.

"Of course. I was standing by Justin's grave when he came up."

(To Sabel he had always been 'Justin', taking it from us, naturally.)

"Yes? And then?" I could hardly wait for her to go on.

"He just stood there looking at the gravestone."

"He didn't speak to you?"

"No. He pretended he didn't see me."

"So you broke the ice, was it?"

"Yes. I knew he wouldn't speak if I didn't."

"It was his place to speak to you first," said Grett.

Sabel gave her a side glance that on any other occasion might have earned her a bonclust.

"Don't be silly," she said. "As far as I knew he didn't know who I was. So I told him."

"What did he say to that?" I asked.

Mother's lips were forming unspoken questions all the time, and father's face for once was naked with curiosity.

"He just grinned. 'Then you know all about me,' he said. 'Who didn't,' I said to him. Then he asked me to say my name again. He couldn't get over the 'Sabel' part of it. So I told him it was th~~at~~ Welsh for Isabel. 'Don't worry,' he said, 'I can speak Welsh too.' . . . 'Then why don't you?' I said.—"

"Come on, Sabel." I was in no mood for this small talk between them. "Come to the point, girl. Did he say anything about us . . . or Justin?"

She closed her eyes as she always did when I would cut her short.

"Can I go on now?" she asked at last.

I nodded grimly. +

"All right then." She winked across at Grett. "Where was I now? Oh, yes, he started to talk in Welsh: 'So this is where he's buried, is it?' he said."

The way she imitated the Brecon twang in Jasper's voice made me smile in spite of myself.

"What . . . what did he sound like?" put in father. "No, no, not the way he speaks, but was he sneering or what?"

She looked at father as if he was a stranger.

"Sneering? What do you think? No, he just looked down at the stone and tried to read it. So I told him what was there."

"And then?"

She gave a little shrug.

"It was then you all came up. He didn't say anything else till you turned round. Then he . . . he . . ." She stopped as though unwilling to go on.

"What did he say then?" There was no mistaking the anxiety in Grett's voice and I wondered why it was she was looking so suspiciously at Sabel.

"He . . . he asked if I was courting."

"What did you say to that?"

"I told him the truth."

"Go on!"

Sabel's lips pouted and for once she seemed a little ashamed or embarrassed. Then, showing us the tautness of her chin and throat again, she met our eyes defiantly. "He just laughed," she said, "and said there must be a shortage of young fellows in the parish."

"Quite right, too!" Grett nodded her approval. "Good for him. It didn't take him long to see what

Felindre is. Don't you see, Sabe', you are the laughing stock of the place."

"I don't care." Sabel's eyes were now black. "You are all against me. But never mind! He's on my side, anyway."

"He? Who? Something had leapt inside me.

"Jasper," she said. "He said: 'I don't want anything to do with your family. You know why. But with you, it's different, see!'"

She smiled to herself, and I knew exactly what lay behind it. I had felt exactly the same myself when I was courting Grett: with Justin behind me I had cared for nobody.

"But didn't he say anything about Justin?" The disappointment in mother's voice brought me back to myself.

Sabel shook her head.

"No, he didn't say anything. . . . Oh yes, wait a minute . . ."

My blood leapt at this, and I saw how father cupped his hand behind his ear.

"He gave the gravestone a shake; said the ground must have sunk and that it should be seen to and re-set. He said the stone was 'out of true' or something. . . ."

I went outside on some pretext or other. So he had put his hand on Justin's gravestone! Strange meeting indeed for those two. Yes, the old wheel was now gathering speed. I looked over towards the church and the Vans as if to tell Justin all was well.

Before I went back in, I heard Moc coming down the lane. I ran to meet him like a boy. He was reeking of drink and nodded his head and grinned as I told him about Jasper and Sabel. Then, as I finished telling him, he swung on his heel and fetched me a fond blow to the stomach. "Now for it," he said. "Now for it."

But he knew no more than did I what it was that lay in store for us.

Chapter 9

BUT the weeks went by and it was with wonder and surprise that we found December was on us. And still we waited for some sign or hint that Jasper would change his attitude towards us. Night after night as we sat around the fire, the talk would flag and I had the feeling that each one of us was waiting for the click of the yard gate, or for the dogs to start barking.

The only news we had of Jasper was that the tap-room of the Tavnarn was getting noisier each week, and people were not behind in saying that the tone of the parish was dropping to what it used to be when Justin was alive. We heard, too, that when Jasper was in liquor he was not above saying what he thought of us as a family. Moc, of course, was all for going up there to piggat him to a quarrel, sure in his mind that it would bring matters to a head. Still, as father said, things were bad enough as they were without making them worse.

So the weeks passed, and a hard enough time it was for us. There was no pleasure any more in going to the Mart. Not that people said anything to us. That, indeed, would have been easier to bear. What was hard was that no one said a word to us about the business. A word would have helped, the more harsh the better, for then we could have hit back. For once the old man was disarmed, though to be sure he glared at everyone as though provoking them to tap his anger.

So it was that the days went by without incident. The holly reddened in the hedges, and there were windless hours

round about Advent when, if you had been in the right mood and spirit, a miracle might have come on you at any turn of the road.

To kill time, because there was nothing now but the two nights' feathering before the Christmas market, Moc and I ditched and pleated until there wasn't a hedge where even a weasel could get through. Even so, work as we did until my arms ached and my hand blistered under the sheepskin glove, the afternoons darkened too soon. For once there was no pleasure for me in the prospect of the long hours in the lamplight. Pointed enough it was too that Lewsin did not bring his choir along for practice at nights. And though we saw him day after day, we dared not ask him why because we knew he was doing all he could to spare our feelings.

Then, one night, a week or so before the feathering it was, I stayed up after Grett and the rest of them had gone to bed. Twelve struck, then the half hour, and I still sat there with my stockinged feet thrust into the oven for warmth. The fire had burnt low and nothing short of a crime it would have been to use any of the sticks which the old man had piled on the hob ready for the morning. Why I sat there I don't know. Perhaps it was that I had heard or read somewhere that if a man sat up all night and gave his mind to thinking, he could change his whole life. Poor me! As for thinking, it was out of the question. My mind went round and round over the same thing, like a horse hitched to the pole of the horse-power. I could go back only as far as that night some six weeks before when Jasper had caught up with us on the way home. And as far as the future was concerned, I could see no way at all.

I turned down the lamp so that it should not smoke. The faint reek of the paraffin was as homely and natural to me as was the sharp tang of the stable floor or the warm smell of the byres.

Then, at last, for no good it was to think of sitting up all night, I lit the candle to go upstairs. But first, even though my eyes were gritty with sleep, I had to glance at my row of books which stood wedged tightly together on the shelf suspended from the ceiling.

I touched a volume here and there, tilting it half out and then replacing it. Now that I had locked Dafydd ab Gwilym away from Sabel, I needed it more than ever. Something had died inside me, and I felt that a line or phrase of Dafydd's might perhaps quicken me again. There was that poem where he said about the winds of October being powerless to dout the riding moon . . . I continued to look at the books. Years of carrying them in my pockets had furred their bindings. Grett was for ever teasing me that I had no respect for a book what with the way I took one or another with me whenever I went hedging or cutting fern. And when I would explain to her that a book did not seem to belong to me until its spon newness had worn off, she always laughed and said that according to such reasoning I should now love her more than ever. . . .

Then, at last, as I decided to take Trebor Mai up with me, I felt myself go as taut as a trace. I listened hard, convinced I had heard someone outside. My first thought was that it was Moc. But Moc, I remembered, had come home before supper, as full as a cask, and had gone straight to bed. And then, I thought of Jasper.

I tiptoed softly to the back kitchen.

As luck would have it, Moc had left the back door on the latch. It opened noiselessly as I lifted it so that the weight would be off the hinges.

For a moment or so I could see nothing but the dark firs and the stars above them. Then, as my eyes got used to the darkness, I saw the round ricks and some white clothes which mother or Grett had left out to bleach in the hoarfrost.

There was no sound anywhere.

Still in my stockinged feet I crossed over to the grass which I always kept scythed down so that the women should not get wet as they went to and fro with the washing. I could now see everything plainly. Then, as I came round the end of the kitchen, my heart almost stopped as I saw the steep outline of a ladder against Sabel's window. For a moment I could not move. My feet were as though bogged in a foss. The thought that Sabel had someone in her bedroom almost killed me. Though midnight courting or 'bundling' as they called it was said to be customary in outlandish parts, it was unknown to us here. The most any lover could expect around here was a midnight supper or a chat in the kitchen after the rest had gone to bed.

I gripped the ladder until it vibrated under my fingers. Then, as I was about to mount it, a twig snapped in the hedge near-by. I turned at once and saw Sabel and a dark figure standing close together in the shadows. I trembled with relief and made my way back to the kitchen. Once inside, I left the back door an inch or two open, and waited to see what would happen. I knew now that it was Matt Felindre who was with her. But as long as they stood talking there in the hedge, I felt there was nothing to worry about.

The flagstones under my feet burned for a while and then stung as cold as ice. Two o'clock struck and I began to wonder if they were still there. I opened the door a little wider and caught a sheaf of stars between it and the frame. The next second I heard the creak of a floor-board in Sabel's room. Then, as I opened the door wider, I saw Matt carrying the ladder and placing it against one of the ricks. He was soon away, and I heard the swish of his feet as he went up the lane, keeping well off the frost-rimed verge.

When I got back to the kitchen the candle was almost

burnt out and the guttering grease hung like stalactites over the lip of the candlestick. I went upstairs as softly as I could, taking care to miss the creaking step near the top.

I said nothing as I got in and lay at Grett's side. Whether or not she had heard Sabel I had no idea. All she did was to hold my hand as she turned towards me. But I could not sleep. I watched a star caught in the crotch of the sycamore outside the window, its brightness dwindling to a mere point until it swung slowly behind the branch. At last, however, the warmth from Grett's body permeated the shivering iciness that was on me. My thoughts began to merge one into the other. Jasper . . . Sabel . . . Matt . . .? Where was it all going to end? I was as though lost in a forest darker and more vast than Allt-Y-Fagddu or Blaen Ddol . . . I could see Moc and me riding through some dark, narrow valley. He was a length in front of me, gigantic in the darkness, and gave no sign that he heard me as I called on some name. At one moment it was Grett's name I was calling, then it was mother's, and then Sabel's. I could hear myself thundering Sabel's name and the rocks answering me back . . .

I awoke at once, my body again clammy with cold sweat. Why had I called like that and where had I been riding with Moc?

I turned to Grett again and held her as closely as I could without waking her.

Chapter 10

CHRISTMAS came and went by, quiet and ~~not~~ as ever with the frost set like iron on the land and the trees cracking and splitting with the bitter cold of it. For once no carollers came to Trewern. Faithful to the old custom, I went on foot through the crunching lanes to bid squire, Dico, and Plas Melgoed the season's greetings. There were still lights in the Tavarn as I passed there, and it was as much as I could do not to go in and ask Jasper if he would come over to us for the day. But the shouting and laughter inside decided me against it. It was all out of keeping with the starlight and the Vans graven black against the east. Mother delayed dinner that day as long as she could; but though she went every other minute to peep out through the window, not a soul came down the lane.

Then, the following week because the weather was just right for salting, we killed the pig. Twenty-two score she was when we got her on the stilliance. I say 'we', but it was Moc who finally got her on the hook. Dico Lewys and I could do nothing with her, being, as father scoffed, too long in the legs and weak in the loins. The next morning father was only just in time to stop mother from going over to the Fagddu woods. He took the cloth-covered basket gently enough from her and led her back to the house. He was tactful enough not to look what was inside the basket. Grett told me afterwards how mother had taken a dozen of the largest faggots, some steaks, and a piece of sparib, packing them so neat and

tidy in grease-proof, and with a little note on top for Jasper. She was quiet and red-eyed for the rest of the morning and refused to look at her dinner saying it was nothing short of a sin to have so much small meat on hand while Jasper was having to rough it at the Tavnarn. Still, as the old man said—hitting the nail on the head: a gift would only have embarrassed Jasper. “Don’t forget,” he chided, “a man will forgive you anything but a kindness. Don’t go spoiling everything by putting coals of fire on his head. Never see him we will if you start that. There’s only one language he do understand, and I’ve known that lingo all my life. A Peele he is to the marrow. You mark my words!”

Christmas, the New Year, and there we were half-way through January, the frost broken at last and the long month loud with wind and rain. All we had to look forward to now was the Eisteddfod. But I had no heart this year to compete for the chair. The subject was made to my measure, and but for Jasper I would have plumbed my heart to do full justice to it. But there it was. I no longer delighted in words and the mood of the earth was something I had not sensed or felt since before the Thanksgiving. Even so, when the adjudications were read out on Eisteddfod night, I felt sure I could have bettered the one that got the chair. What did these youngsters with their deep Welsh know of cynghanedd and the rules laid down by the old bards? Then, before the Male Voice started, I went outside. The schoolroom was packed to the doors, and though it was stormy enough with the rain driving flat from the Vans, there were as many in the yard as there were inside. People were arriving every minute. The Tavnarn, naturally, would be open till on in the morning, special extension. Moc was still there, and I knew we would get no glimpse of him until close on mid-

night. What with the wood-feller, the crowds from over the mountain and Senny, I dreaded what it would be like when the big choirs would start competing. The Male Voice Test Piece was Joseph Parry's 'Jesus of Nazareth'. Even without the hope of seeing Jasper at the Eisteddfod, Joseph Parry's piece would itself have been enough to bring mother out, never mind what the weather was.

It was then, just as I went out through the school gates, that I saw Matt Felindre and his crowd. Before I could think, I was crossing towards him. Grett and I had bottled our feelings long enough where he was concerned. We had not even said a word to Sabel about the ladder incident a few weeks back.

As I came up to him there was some banter going on between him and the young fellows. Then, as I heard Sabel's name my blood boiled.

"You can't go in now, Matt," Rhys blacksmith was saying. "Old Peele and Ned are watching young Sabel like a pedigree bitch. Besides, what are you running after young Sabel for? Think you got any hope there?"

As I got up to Matt I saw how he closed his right fist with the thick thumb pointing upwards and quivering. It was the first time I had ever seen the gesture and there was no mistaking the cocksure significance of it. At that moment one of the crowd saw me and motioned Matt to turn round.

For a second he looked startled. I kept my fists closed in case he should show big in front of the others.

"You!" I could hardly get a word out. "Talking of my daughter you are."

"Mr. Peele——" He came a step towards me, and then dropped his voice as if wishing to keep the conversation private: "You may have heard Sabel's name. No harm in that, is there? Believe me, if there was, I'd be

the first to shut up." Then, dropping his voice still lower: "I'd like a word or two with you. Just you and me, yes?"

He motioned his head in the direction of the lane going down by the end of the school. But I was in no mood to grant him a thing.

"You can say as much as I want to hear from you right here," I said. "What is it?"

The others backed away. Matt lit a cigarette and knew better than to offer me one.

"All right then. It's about me an' Sabel."

"Go on!"

"All right. I reckon you got to know sooner or later." For a moment I held my breath, my legs trembling under me. "It's just this," he went on. "Keep Sabel away from me. . . . If you don't—well, I'll not answer for her."

"You'll answer for yourself," I burst out.

"Just a minute now. Let me finish." It was easy to see how he attracted girls to him. "You may as well hear it now and from me. I'm mad about her——"

"What!" I laughed in my temper. "You mad about Sabel. Why——"

"I know. You are going to tell me I'm old enough to be her father." He laughed. "Thirty-six I am, that's all. Anyhow, I'm not a crot and I know my own mind. That's why I'm asking you to keep her away from me. Send her away, off on a holiday, do anything you like—but keep her away from me. I tell you, if she's around, well, there's nothing I can do about it. Diawl, I'm only flesh an' blood."

"It is you should discourage her," I muttered. Seeing him so tidy and sincere, my temper was now gone. "It's not fair, Felindre. It's not fair, man!"

"Not fair!" It was now I who was concerned that the

crowd was too close to us. But Matt seemed oblivious of them. "Diain, don't you realize I'm asking you to do this for her sake?"

"All I can say," I said, "is that you keep / away from her."

"Impossible. Just try to see things from my standpoint. Try and imagine what it's like with a girl like Sabel——"

"Why Sabel more than anybody else?"

He looked at me as though he imagined I wanted him to pay Sabel and us some compliment.

"Don't ask," he said quietly. "If you don't know Sabel, then who does? Or if you don't, then it's blind you are. Uffern!" He turned to go. "No good talking it is. I've told you how I feel about her, so don't expect me to turn my back on her. I wouldn't be flesh an' blood if I could resist her. She's in my blood, I tell you; and I can't promise you nor nobody else not to take her if she'll have me——"

"Take her?" I heard myself shouting.

"Aye, that's what I said. But not what you are thinking. It's marriage I mean."

With that he turned his back on me and rejoined his crowd.

A titter of laughter followed me as I made my way back to the schoolroom. I looked around to see if there was any sign of Moc. It was now I needed him; Jasper, too, if he had been one with us.

We stayed on at the Eisteddfod until well past midnight, and when we left, the Chief Choral was still to come. We saw no sign of Jasper that night, and when I saw Moc the next morning he told me how the crowd at the Tavn had afterwards gone on to the Pandy before turning in to the Eisteddfod. He told me, too, that the news of my quarrel with Felindre was already common talk and that

Jasper had been heard to say that blood was thicker than water.

I pondered on that for days, but whether Jasper had meant that he understood my feelings as far as Sabel was concerned or that he was beginning to identify himself with us was not for me to know.

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Chapter II

BUT nothing came of it. Week followed week with no gesture or move from Jasper. It was as if we didn't exist. February found us in the grip of the hardest frost any of us could remember. Day after day we cut into the hay until our hay-knives were shining blue-black with the sweat of it, and come March we had sliced well into the ricks that stood behind the house.

Not a cloud rode the wind; and from dawn till dusk the Vans rose implacable and black between us and the tardy moon which might bring a change in the weather. The night skies glittered, and easy it was to pick out The Plough, Orion, and "The Butcher's Hacker" as we called them. And so light was the air, the vault of the sky like some vast sounding-board, that when the wind came down from Myddfai way it brought with it the sound of the axes from the Fagddu woods. And the pity of it was that the speech of the axe was the only talk we could have with Jasper.

Father was still confident, however, that Jasper would come round to our way of thinking. But I was worried, and so was mother too. Any day now, and the sap would be springing, and there would be silence once more in the Fagddu woods. Whether the tree-fellers would be back again in the autumn no one could tell. But if Jasper was anything like I imagined him to be, he might easily be up beyond Plinlimon by then.

Then as the small month—Mis Bach!—as we call February—went out, things started to move. Perhaps it was the effect of the long, hard winter beginning to tell on us,

or maybe it was the stir of the spring—who knows. But Sabel defied both Grett and me, and started meeting Matt Felindre night after night. Nor was it any use father looking significantly at the clock when she came in late after supper each night and muttering that one like Jasper was enough in any family. The end of it was that Moc took it into his head one Saturday night to bring Matt to heel.

As he rode off to the Tavarn that night he gave me a heavy wink and shook his fist reassuringly. I think Sabel must have guessed something, too, for I caught her looking fearfully at the clock as the pin moved round to ten. The old man, of course, was in the know, and I saw how his eye brightened as we heard Moc come down the lane. For a moment I was afraid things had not gone Moc's way, for it was not like Moc to close the yard gate so quietly. Then, as he came from the stable, I heard him whistling to himself.

"Moc is early." Mother rose to put the kettle on the fire. "Not short of money, is he?" She looked enquiringly at father.

The door opened and there was Moc, his left eye blackened and his collar hanging loose from his stud. He grinned at father and me. Sabel's eyes went black as she looked first at him and then at us.

Moc shook his head as he met her glance.

"It's not what you think, Sabel. Don't you worry. That Matt of yours just went with tail between his legs; him and his set with him. I offered to take them one by one I did. No stomach in one of them, girl."

Father and I got up at once. Moc nodded grimly at us.

"Aye, mishtir, Jasper it was." He put his hand to his eye and felt the swelling with the tips of his fingers. "Left his trade mark on me, didn't he?"

Mother gazed at him in horror. Sabel turned in the doorway, her face paler than I had ever seen it before.

"What happened? Out with it!" The old man's lips were so tight he could hardly get the words out.

Moc shrugged his shoulders and looked ruefully at his knuckles.

"Started pigging at me he did. Asked me if I still fancied myself as much as I did when Justin was behind me."

"What did you say?"

"Me? Nothing, mishtir. Just let him carry on. Then . . ."

"Then what?"

Moc's face became grim again. He turned to mother: "Look, mistress, in drink he was, see? Didn't know what he was saying . . ."

"He said something about us, did he?" The old man half snorted as he spoke.

"Aye, plenty. But I could stand that all right . . ."

"Was it . . . was it something he said about Justin?" Mother's eyes were now shining, and I could see how the pout on her upper lip was more pronounced. Moc half turned towards the fire-place. His spittle sizzled on the bar of the grate.

"Aye. Finished me that did. Diain, more'n I could stand it was, Jasper or no Jasper."

"What did he say then?"

Moc shook his head. "Never mind what he said, mistress. Tavarn talk's not in your line."

Bit by bit we got the details from him, and for the life of me hard it was not to wish I had been there myself to see Moc standing up for Justin. The bits that Moc left out I got from Dico the next day after church. A sight it was, he said, to see Moc hold Jasper, not returning a blow, but holding him by the collar and twisting it until Jasper

was half throttled. "Uffern, Ned," Dico was demonstrating the way Moc had held Jasper. "There was Moc holding him at arm's length. I wonder Moc didn't hit him, you know what Moc is. But all he did was hold him. . . . Plenty of fight there was in the boy, too. But Moc! Oh, Ned, it was like the old days. 'Don't you go saying anything about Justin Peele,' he says, 'alking like your father, quiet and soft. 'Not when I'm about. Me an' him was butties, see?'" and another twist of the collar till your nephew was blue in the face. 'Not fit to wipe his boots you are. Just remember that. Pity he's not here to settle you his self.'" Dico then tried to ground me to my knees as Moc had done to Jasper.

All the way home from church I wondered what turn things would now take. As father had it, things would now perhaps come to a head. "A pity you didn't give him what for, Moc," he had said when Moc had given us his version of it all.

"Don't worry." Moc pursed his thick lips. "I don't think he'll stretch his tongue against Justin again; not when I'm about anyway."

"Ha! If it had been me, I'd have laid him out," said the old man. "That would have sobered him up. You should have laid him out, Moc, and brought him home here stiff."

We little knew how prophetic his words were to be, for before the month was out Jasper was home here with us, and there was the yard soft and quiet with straw lest any noise should be too sudden a shock for him.

The news of Moc's quarrel with Jasper spread like wild-fire. The parish was full of wild talk, and Lewsin told us a few days after what the wood-fellers were out to clear the Tavarn every night. Jos the Tavarn could do nothing with them. Nevertheless, he sent word down to us, beg-

ging Moc to keep away. Moc grinned when father read out the riot act to him, and said he hoped that his thirst would not get the better of him.

Then, on the Friday before Palm Sunday, he set off with me for the church, the spade on his shoulder while I carried the shears in my side pocket. Mother had been complaining ever since Christmas that the graves were a disgrace to us, and that if one of us wouldn't see to them, she would ask Grett or Sabel to help her get them ready for Palm Sunday. We took a crowbar with us, too. As Jasper had rightly said, the soil under Justin's stone had given—I dared not think what had happened six feet down—and it was time we set the stone true again.

By the time we got to the church the day worsened and I didn't like the look of the Vans. With the clouds blowing towards them, the old rocks seemed at times to be towering and moving towards us, hovering and beetling in their anger and casting a shadow over the whole parish.

We worked without a word, racing the clock to get finished before dark. When, at last, we had levered the stone and packed it tight with loose rock, there was only light enough to see the bubble in Moc's flagon as we took the level. Then, because Moc wanted to call at the Tavarn to take some flagons home with him, we hid the tools in the Parish Room stable and set the horses' heads down road to the mill and the Tavarn.

The wind was now in our faces. All we could hear was the whine of it in the top branches and the creak as twin boles rasped against each other. Once down by the mill there was some shelter, to be sure. Nevertheless, we could hear the screech of the gale as it passed overhead with now and again a deep note under it like a pedal note from a pipe organ. How much of our ricks would be left after this I dared not think. They were, naturally, a little top heavy by now. Do what you will, it is not easy to

keep a hay-knife straight as you cut down. Ah well, another month or six weeks at the most would see the cattle out again, especially if the spring would not be late. If the winter had been anything to go by we were even now overdue for a spell of good weather.

It being not yet five, the Tavarn was in darkness and there was nothing for it but to go round the back to the kitchen. We could hear the whole place whistling and creaking like a barn.

Moc had no trouble in getting what he wanted. After all, he was not asking to drink on the premises before opening time. He grinned his thanks as I told Jos to charge the flagons to our account.

We didn't waste any time talking. I could see from the way Jos came out to see us off that he wanted us, especially Moc, to be out of the way before Jasper and the rest of them would be home from work. And then it happened. Without warning came the end to what we had been waiting for since Jasper had come to the parish.

At first I thought it was the wind in the whipping firs that sheltered the house. Then, as I listened hard, I heard the thud of hoofs coming up from the Dyfnant valley. The three of us turned and stared down the road. We did not see him till he was nigh on us. For a moment I could not make out who it was, for he seemed gigantic in the half light. Then as he spoke, I knew it was Tal Einon. He reined up sharp and peered down at us.

"That you, Peele?"

"What's up?" shouted Moc before I could answer. "A hell of a thirst you must have to be in such a hurry."

"Thirst be damned!" Tal swung down from the sack tied over the cob's back.

"Good job you're here." He looked at me as he spoke. "There's been an accident."

I knew who it was before he went on, but I could only

stare at him. It was as though I was back in that October when Justin died.

"It's young Jasper . . . This bloody wind—tree toppled over before we was ready," Dai Perrott's killed and Jas is unconscious, concussion. That's what I've come for." He turned to Jos: "We got to get him here somehow. Twm's gone straight for the doctor."

"Where is he now?" I felt there was no time to lose. We would have to get him home to Trewern at once. The Tavarn was no place for him now.

"In our hut. Out to the wide he is. Caught him across the head and shoulders it did."

As Moc and I turned the horses' heads towards the Dynant, I shouted to Jos:

"Get your gambo and come down at once. Bring blankets and a drop of brandy."

With that we were away. So this was it, I said to myself. And though I drove Doll as never before, I knew in my heart that this was the night when Jasper would come home to Trewern. Not for a minute did I think that he would be brought home as Justin had been from Alltwen. This was only the beginning, not the end. Behind me I could hear Moc cursing and shouting as he urged the mare on, but for once I led him all the way. The wind in the Dyfnant drowned the beat of our hoofs. I cut the corner over the Doldre bridge so close that I felt the stone wall tear the knee of my breeches. Then, as we neared the Fagddu, I saw the gleam of a lantern through the trees. What was left of the old forest groaned and whined around us as we pulled up and ran to the hut.

The wood-fellers made way for us as soon as they saw me. For a moment my legs weakened under me as I saw a still form in the corner, some sacks covering him from sight. But that, of course, was Dai Perrott.

Jasper was lying on the table, coats piled over him to keep him warm. One of the men lifted a lantern and shone it on his face as I went towards him. His black hair was matted with blood and the only movement was the slight quiver of his nostrils as he breathed. I could only stare down at him. To see him so helpless almost broke my heart. Moc bent over him and turned back his eyelid. The black pupil reflected the glare of the lantern.

"Better not move him, mister," said one of the men. "You never know with concussion."

"Lucky it was only a branch," said another. "Poor old Dai got the trunk on him. The damme tree was on 'em before they knew it."

I sat down on the bench by the table. With luck, the doctor would be along any minute. No one spoke. Even if we had wanted to, the wind at times would have drowned our voices. Once or twice Jasper moved his head and I saw how his face twisted as if from a spasm of pain. But when I bent close to him I could only hear the half groan he gave as he released each breath.

"Moc."

"Aye?"

"Look, get home. Tell them what's happened. Enough to kill mother this 'd be without warning."

He looked doubtfully at Jasper, thrusting out his underlip as though unwilling to leave me.

"Go on," I said. "Careful how you tell them though. We'll be along as soon as Jos and the doctor come."

He went at that. The minutes wore on slowly. One of the men took out a pipe but put it back in his pocket as he looked across at the body under the sacking. Somewhere in the howling darkness outside a tree crashed, shaking the shed as it hit the ground. I looked anxiously at Jasper wondering for a moment if the noise of it had broken through his coma and then fearful of what the shock might

do for him. The piled coats rose and fell with his breathing.

In the fitful light of the lantern he was more like Justin than ever. Times I fancied I was back at Justin's side in Alltwen barn, the bull's enraged bellowing filling the air, and the men silent and still because of the dead in their midst.

I prayed silently to myself. Even so, behind all my anxiety and fear, something inside me shouted exultantly, matching itself to the trumpet snarl of the storm outside. It was not for nothing that Perrott should have been taken and Jasper left to us. Then, as I marked how Jasper's breathing was now a little more regular, the doctor came in through the door, and there behind him were Jos and his son with blankets and a sheet of tarpaulin.

As the doctor turned back the coats that covered Jasper it seemed for a moment that the storm outside had ceased. Presently, the doctor straightened up. I looked enquiringly at him.

"Get the gambo!" he said. "We must get him home. Where is he staying? The Tavn?"

"No, Trewern," I said. "He's one of us."

One of the wood-fellers started to say something but stopped as he caught my eye. Then we lifted the table and carried Jasper between us to where the gambo was backed to the door.

As we drove slowly through the Dyfnant, up over the Doldre, past the Helem, and down over Tavn-Y-Gwynt, it was as much as I could do not to make them hurry. But the doctor was there on the flat-bottomed gambo all the way, cursing the men at times as the wheels jolted and crashed over the rain-filled ruts. Then, as we came to our Allt, there was father bare-headed on Moc's mare, the rain glistening on his face and his eyes questioning me as

he wheeled to fall in step with us. He must have understood at once how things were, for as I looked up at him the light from the lanterns showed the grim set of his lips. Soon, the lights from the house showed waveringly through the driving slant of the rain. As we came into the yard Moc and Sabel ran out to meet us. Framed in the doorway were mother and Grett. As I ran forward, mother came out to meet us. I reassured her at once, and as I held her for a moment while she cried and trembled with relief, I saw the candlelight shining from Justin's old room.

BOOK TWO

Chapter 12

Now that I look back on the months that followed, I find I have little or no count of the spring that year. All I know is that with Jasper coming to Trewern the old radiance came back into our skies. Once again, just as it had been when my love for Grett was on all things, there was a meaning and significance behind everything. Where the stark trees and the dark lie of the land had seemed inimical, there was now softness and warmth. Time and again I found myself repeating those verses from the Song of Songs where it says the winter is over and gone and that the flowers are come again with the voice of the dove heard round about. With us, of course, it was the Vans wearing their purple; the primroses and the blue flags down in the waun, and the cuckoos calling from down by the Lyswen.

Naturally, for the first week or so a hush like the grave hung over the old place. We all spoke in whispers and the yard was muffled a pitch-fork deep with straw and fern. The doctor had warned us from the first night that it was a case of touch and go with Jasper, that he had to come out of the deep soc he was in naturally and by himself. We locked the dogs in the stable and even removed the weights from the grandfather clock so that its heavy tick and hourly chime should in no way disturb him.

Not an hour passed but that one of us set with him. By day it was mother, Grett, and Sabel; then, as soon as we had downed tools for the day, father, Moc, and myself took the night in shifts.

Then, as we sat at supper one night, some ten or twelve days after the accident it was, there was Sabel at the door, her eyes shining as she beckoned us to go upstairs. One look at her face was enough. He remembered only just in time to give way to most of the men who should be the first to greet him. Sabel ran over.

I can see Sabel now, then, and hopped in behind one another to see him. She went over to Jasper and half supporting him as he momentarily lifted himself to look at us. For a second or so he, the man, just as Justin would have done, and the deep frown between his eyebrows became a dark questioning as he looked from one of us to the other. But he must have realized at once where he was, for as he sank back on the pillow the frown left his face, and as if acknowledging that he was come home to us he gave a half-grin, as if laughing at himself.

Don't ask me what we said to him. Indeed, for the first few minutes we were too full to speak. All the old man could do was to nod his head as if reminding us that his words had come true after all. As for me, I kept saying to myself that a change had come over the old place in the last few minutes. I had the feeling that we were complete again, that Justin's place had been filled at last, and that the walls of Trewern were again solid and strong between us and the outside world. Moreover, there was no doubt in my mind that now Jasper had come home he would be with us for good. I know now that that was how he felt, too. Whether it is a fact or not, I don't know, and I never came to taxing the doctor about it—but I like to think that all through the days and nights he had been lying there, the very spirit of the place must have been seeping steadily, and surely into his consciousness. Who knows indeed! Perhaps it was the very fact that we had brought him home to Trewern that had saved him. All I can say is that when I have been away for a day or two, as

is the case each autumn when we drive the ewes down Towy way for the winter tack, I feel after a while that I am dying for the smell of the mountains and the taste of our well water. Then, the moment I come within sight of the Vans, I am myself again. So it was, too, when Moc and I rode home from Cadlan. . . . But we have not come to that yet, though come we will for all the heaviness of the last mile of our journey.

But to get back to Jasper. After all, the place was in his blood. And there's a story it would be if he could be telling this story, telling how he awoke to the feel of the old place, seeing Sabel leaning over him, with the old people, Grett, Moc, and me standing behind her. . . . I can see mother now as she tried to speak to him, the old glasses blurring all the time so that she could do nothing but smile at him and keep on smoothing the sheet away from his chin. I remember, too, how I caught something like a tick of nervous fear on Grett's lips as she watched Sabel smoothing his hair from his forehead. But it was only momentary, and I had no call to think of it again until on in the summer. . . .

Before I went downstairs I went into our bedroom. But because of the way my mind wandered this way and that, and what of the hard floor-boards, I found I could not concentrate on what was in my heart to say. Little enough price to pay it would have been for me to go right through the Te Deum. But there it is—it is hard enough to pray even when your need is great, let alone when you are full of joy.

After a while the owls outside told me it was dark, that the trees were blurred and ragged against the sky. A sudden call, half startled and having in it a note of anguish or fright—this was ever the coming of night around Trewern.

I opened the door and listened for a moment to the

murmur of voices coming up from the kitchen. No need was there any more to talk, in whispers. The whole house was alive with movement again. There was talking going on in Jasper's room, too. I could hear mother's, still rather shy questions and the watery ripple of Sabel's laughter. There, too, was Jasper's voice.

I turned instinctively and looked out through the window in the direction of the church. Against the black edge of the Vans the afterglow in the sky was as bright as dawn.

Chapter 13

THE first hint we had that everything was all right was on the day when he was well enough to be brought downstairs for the first time. True, he had said nothing when Moc brought his tin trunk from the Tavarn and dumped it between the end of the bed and the chest-of-drawers. Nor did he say anything when Lewsin brought the news that the wood-fellers had left the Fagddu woods. With the sap rising strong and thick there could be no further cutting until the autumn would come again. Yet, even so, we none of us knew for sure how things would be as soon as he'd be on his feet again.

A day it was towards the end of May with large, lonely clouds moving in slow procession across the sky. Times their shadows rested on the Vans, staining the mauve into deep purple. Sabel had put great bunches of blue-bells into high vases. The watery blue of the flowers and the rainbow dazzle where the sun broke on the cut-glass filled the kitchen with colour. The table was laid ready for tea. On the fender a piled plateful of pancakes, golden-brown, buttered, and covered with caster, stood waiting for us. But mother still had to wipe each cup and saucer. As she explained to Jasper, it was only on special occasions that we used the green-and-gold set from the corner-cupboard; and this year, for once, there had been no chance to do the spring-cleaning. And it was then, as he lay back in father's chair, his eyes roving over the kitchen, that I saw him lean forward and stare past mother's shoulder to where Justin's photograph hung on the wall.

Mother put the cup she was wiping as gently as she could in the saucer belonging to it. The crystal tinkle it made rose clear in the silence that had come on us. We hardly dared breathe.

I looked anxiously at Jasper afraid of what his next words would be. But before he could say a word, mother crossed over to the wall and lifted the framed photograph off the nail. Her hand trembled a little as she wiped the glass with her apron. Moc then took it from her and, after blowing the dust off the back of it, he carried it across to Jasper as though it was an illuminated testimonial.

"How's that?" Moc stood it end up on the table and turned it towards Jasper. Whatever difference had been between Jasper and him since their quarrel at the Tavern was all over and done with.

"A little to the left, Moc." Mother adjusted it so that the light from the window did not glare on it. "That's better!" She swallowed hard and turned to Jasper:

"There he is, Jasper . . . You know who he is . . ."

Not a word was said as he continued to stare at it.

"So that's him!" Jasper leaned back in his chair. Then, as if saying the name for the first time in his life, he said it half musingly: "Justin Peele."

I knew even as he said it that there was no bitterness left in him.

The soft wind ruffled the sycamores outside as though the old trees were clapping their hands. When I looked back at Jasper he grinned across at me.

"Reckon I must have given you a start that first night." He again cast a sidelong glance at the picture. "Might be a photo of my," he added.

"He was heavier than you," said father.

"Thicker set," put in Moc. "No waist, just the same yidth all down he was, waist and chest like one. Close on

two hundred he was on the shearing day that last year . . . What do you go? A hundred and eighty?"

"Just about," said Jasper. "In my clothes, mind."

"I should hope so," laughed Sabel. "Don't you dare go stripping yourself to get on our shearing scales."

"Sabel! Sabel!" Grett's dimples, however, belied the shocked tone of her voice.

"Tell me"—mother motioned Sabel to keep quiet as she turned to Jasper—"tell me, now. How old are you?"

"Twenty-five, just gone."

She made a rapid calculation on her knee as if practising scales.

"Twenty-five! Justin would have been forty-nine now. . . . In his prime he would have been . . ." The old man made the chair creak under him as he shifted himself impatiently, but mother took no notice. Her eyes focused past Jasper as she went on: "There was no one could stand up to him——" Then, realizing no doubt that her words might have pained Grett, she bit her lip and hurried to cover her mistake. "Grand boys they were, the two of them, both Jeff and Justin. Pity it was that it had to be like that——"

"No need there is to talk about that, Anne." The old edge was back in father's voice. It was something we had not heard in the muffled weeks just gone by. "What is past is finished and done with. Let them be now. Do you think Jasper is interested in all that?"

"Don't worry"—Jasper gave mother an understanding nod and smile—"I know all about it, all there is to know."

"Did you ever hear about the scrap at Brecon?" asked Moc excitedly. But as soon as he had spoken he looked apprehensively at me. It had been Jasper's reference to that night which had settled beyond all doubt who he was when we first met him. Jasper grinned as he saw the look on Moc's face.

"The night at The Oracle?" He nodded grimly. "Aye, I heard of it." He looked at the picture and lifted it on end. "Finished Da! Probert that night did . . ." Then, the smile fading from his lips: "Finished my mother, too, that night did."

Though the Lyswen was the width of the Allt and two fields away, the sound of it was like a runnel outside our very window.

"Tell me," mother looked away from him as if afraid to meet his eyes. "How . . . how did your mother feel about him? Bitter she was—yes?"

He shook his head.

"No . . . she was not bitter. That was what used to make me so mad. Wouldn't hear a word against him she would. That's why she named me 'Jasper'—thought it was his name . . . And she would have it, too, that if he'd lived he would have done right by her."

"Good for her!" Moc's arm rose as if to cheer. "And so he would have, myn diawl i!" He took the picture and made to return it to its place. Jasper put out his hand and held it once more to the window.

"Didn't picture him like that . . . Pity we never had a photo of him."

"No need to have a photo of him with you around," said father, "especially with that growth you got. Time you got busy with the razor, or perhaps a trashing hook to start with." He paused, and crossed one thick knee over the other. "Tell me now," he cleared his throat. "What about you? Be you married or hitched up with someone?"

"Me? Married? Uffern dân!" Jasper's laugh and oath took me back years. "What do you think I am?"

"Why not?" Sabel took him up at once. "Nothing so terrible about being married, is there?"

"Don't ask me." Jasper was no longer laughing, though

his eyes measured her quizzically. "I'm not the marrying sort; no thanks!"

"Not the marrying sort, eh?" The old man frowned. "Neither was your father, my boy. More the pity, more the pity. Like father like son, is it? Selling honey to buy treacle . . . Just you remember your mother, my boy. You'll change your tune then perhaps . . ."

I felt as if the floor was giving under me. Mother looked wildly at each of us in turn, and Moc made a grimace as though spitting in disgust. Then, to my relief, I saw that Jasper was paying no attention to what the old man was saying. Indeed, he gave no sign or hint that he had even heard him. He was still looking at Sabel and she at him.

The sound of the Lyswen rose clearer than before.

Chapter 14

BEFORE we could quite realize it Whitsun was with us and gone, each dawn now a pentecostal glory with a chorus of speech and song from every tree and hedge. What went on in the parish no longer interested or troubled us. We were complete in ourselves, and Lewsin no longer bothered to give us the gossip as he came with the post. The Allt more than ever before was our boundary, and no whisper came over the Lyswen of what went on beyond it.

Because none of us had been to church while Jasper was in the balance, we found it hard to start again. Father was the first to go, and as was to be expected no one dared ask him anything about Jasper. Vicar, it is true, and as was right, did mention to him that the least we could do was to show our gratitude for the way things had turned out. We looked guilty at this, and come the following Sunday we all of us took the road to church. For the first time that I could remember, mother gave up her seat with the altos that night and shared our family pew. Not so the old man, though. As usual he sat with the tenors, and more than once he looked his approval over the Common Prayer at us as we came in full and strong in the chants. But nothing untoward happened that night. The young fellows made way for Jasper as he and Moc went before us down to the kissing-gates. I looked everywhere for a sign of Matt Felindre, and was glad for Sabel's sake that there was no glim of him anywhere.

The next morning Jasper came down to early breakfast

in his working clothes. The old man gave him a hard look; then, as if nothing unusual had happened, he told the three of us, Mother, me, and Jasper what the work was for the day. And from that day on Jasper worked like one of us. He took to almost everything as if he had been born to it, though as the old man observed dryly, a good labourer was far from being a farmer. How he would shape when the shearing came along was another matter, and the hedging, ditching, and ploughing would show what he was made of. Nevertheless, Jasper could turn his hand to almost everything; and the old man had to admit that none of us could touch him when it came to handling the horses. The strange thing to the rest of us was the way he and the old man pulled together. And it was not that he was shown any favours. To hear the way the old man shouted and bellowed at him made us afraid at times he would go too far, and mother was not behind in telling him so.

The old man looked at her as though pitying her ignorance.

"Don't you worry," he said. "I know what I'm doing. You want him to feel he's one of us, don't you? All right, then, don't fret. The rough edge of my tongue it is for him then—same as it was for his father before him, and same as Moc and Ned here get." He smiled at this, and for once I suspected him of some hidden streak of humour. "Diain," he went on, warming to his argument, "that is the best compliment I can pay him—same as I do when I ask vicar or squire to take a bite with us in the kitchen here . . . Besides"—he looked cautiously over his shoulder at this, but Jasper was nowhere near, and I remembered how I had seen him and Sabel going down towards the Allt—"besides," continued father, "I want to know what he is made of. If I don't get under his skin, how'm I to know what is there? Looks ain't everything, remember."

I got to find out how much of his mother's in him, might be a bad streak there for all we know . . .”

But Jasper never once showed his teeth, though many were the times when he would wink across at Sabel or Moc as if to say that he knew exactly what it was the old man was up to.

Sabel for once was no trouble to us. Indeed, judging from the way she never went out at nights, I began to think that my little talk with Matt had not been a waste of time after all. Hardly a day went by but that she prepared something special for tea, and she did things to her old working frocks and blouses that made them look like new. Grett said nothing much, but there were nights when a bark or stir outside would waken me suddenly, and I would know from the way she was breathing that she was wide awake. Whenever I asked her about it, she told me not to worry . . . I know now that I should have guessed all was not well from the way she would, in the same breath, suddenly turn and cling to me, as if I was all she had. Yes, she knew even then did Grett. But as for the rest of us, we had no hint that anything was amiss. June came on us and the blaze of high summer shimmered on the pollened fields. We watched the glass anxiously waiting for the wind to find the right hole so that we could start on the hay. Then, on a night in the mid-week of June, I knew why it was that the summer had seemed to come on us betimes and why it was that Grett had more than once clung to me like a frightened child. It was on that night that the old wheel got into its dark rut; and once started on its steep, downward journey there was nothing we could do to scotch or stay its progress.

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There are nights even now when I dream I am back there on the edge of Maesyrian woods. They rear in

front of me, black and forbidding, and all around me is the soft darkness of that June night. So I stand, unable to move, and feeling that at any moment now the revelation I dread will burst upon me with all its hideousness. A paralysis grips my limbs. I find I cannot move a step forward, nor can I turn back from where I am. With each second that passes so does the growing terror weigh more and more heavily on me. The wood in front of me is dark and obscene with evil and shame. A voice unlike my own comes from me and I hear myself cursing Justin. Then I rail at the Almighty. I shout louder and louder, for I feel there is evil in Maesyrarian woods and that the very sound of my voice will send it cowering from me. Then it is Sabel's name I am shouting. Sabel! Sabel! It is then I awake, icy with sweat, and groaning to myself, I begin to realize that the darkness around me is the darkness of my room and that the arm encircling me is Moc's, as he shakes me out of my nightmare.

"Turn on your side," he advises me, and in less than a minute is snoring again. Then, as I turn on my side and nestle for warmth against the great wall of his back, the nightmare fades from my mind. The old house is still and silent for Moc and I are the only ones here now. Once it was Justin riding up through the lane at all hours of the night and creeping past my door in his stockinged feet . . . Justin, Grett, Jasper, Sabel, the old people . . . not a sound of them now! All it seems that lies between me and the church is the solid bulk of Moc's body. . . .

Chapter 15

I CAN see me now as I took a last walk round the fields that night. The weather had at last set fair and I knew from the soft mauve of the Vans that we were in for a fine spell. From now on we would be ding-dong on the hay. What with Moc and Jasper we would make short work of it. First the waun, then the long field above the lane—we would break the back of it in the first three days. A different undertaking it had been in the old days when we had had to scythe every yard of the way and then turn it all the next day with our hand-rakes. Now with the mowing machine and the horse-rake, the harvest had become an almost negligible task, something we took in our stride. Even so, there were times when I found myself longing for the old communal spirit that had brought a host of helpers to each farm in turn. And as I thought of the old days, I turned instinctively towards the field bordering the Allt. There they were, moving in an oblique line across the field: Elias carpenter, old Howells the blacksmith, father, Moc, Justin, Berthlwyd and myself . . . Twenty-three or twenty-five years ago! It was on that morning that Lewsin had brought me my first letter from Grett. It was still folded safely in Trebor Mai's poetry, nestling against the englyn that tells of the moon rising over Llyn-y-aer-Hafnant . . .

It was getting dark now, and the Allt rose a soft mass of blue shadow between me and the distant Vans. Then, as I came to the stile and rested there a moment to get my breath, every nerve in my body became suddenly

tense and alert. My first thought as I saw them arm-in-arm, was that it was Sabel and Matt Felindre. So she was meeting him secretly after all! Then, as I mounted the stile, I saw it was not Matt. I gripped the topmost rail until my finger tips quivered with pain. Jasper and Sabel! But it was impossible. I looked again and saw that there was no gainsaying it, nor was there any mistaking the urgent, hurried way they walked or half ran towards the Allt. I saw, too, that they were not merely arm-in-crook. Jasper's arm around her waist held her tightly to him, and I had the impression that she was letting herself be half carried, her head back against his shoulder, and the skirts of her frock swirling with each step she made. Soon, they were out of sight. I listened hard for an echo of their voices, but all I could hear was the wild beat and thump of my heart.

I sat down on the step of the stile and shook my head as if to banish the memory of what I had just seen. I realized now why it was that Grett had clung to me in her sleep. She must have known from the very beginning what was going on under our very eyes. It explained, too, why Sabel had stopped meeting Felindre. And in that moment I knew in my heart why it was that Jasper had chosen to make his home here with us at Trewern.

For a while I sat there as though incapable of movement. Though the night was calm and still around me, I felt that the old Allt was wild with derisive mockery. And then I began to curse Justin's memory. It was his bastard, the son of a cheap, market-day whore, who had come to Trewern to blight the peace that had at last come to us.

I rose to my feet and cleared the stile as if twenty years had slipped off my shoulders. I must stop Sabel before it was too late. This—this was incest! I had no doubt in my mind that if I did not prevent them, then this very

night would see the consummation of their passion for each other. I saw again the urgent way they had hurried towards the Allt. I remembered, too, that Sabel had clung to Jasper just in the same way that Grett had clung to me on that afternoon in Trecon when we had ourselves half run towards the old mili.

The Allt closed around me as I ran and stumbled along the root-fibred path down towards the Lyswen. I could see nothing now. All I looked for was the pale gleam of Sabel's frock. If I knew her at all—and I was one with every thought and desire in her—she would get as far as she could from the house before she would lie with Jasper. A strange prescience inside me told me that she would take him to Maesyrrarian wood, just across the river. The grass there grew short and thick between the hazel and thorn, whereas in our Allt there was hardly a blade of grass from one year's end to another.

Once or twice as I hurried along, I was tempted to call out to her. But all I could do was to mutter her name to myself as I stumbled this way and that. What had happened between them up until this moment mattered nothing, and what the morrow held in store for us could well wait. All that mattered now was the immediate present. Already, I could see her lying with Jasper.

Then, as I splashed through the Lyswen and saw Maesyrrarian wood rear up in front of me, I felt all the strength go out of my body. What was it, I asked myself, that I wanted to see. Some, I knew, made a game of following couples and creeping as close as they dared to spy on them . . . I shook my head; better by far, I reasoned, if I were to wait where I was until they came out of the wood. Nevertheless, in spite of myself, my steps took me nearer and nearer to the edge of the wood. As I clambered through the hedge that divided me from it, I uprooted a thick hedging stake and found the balance of

it to my liking. It was still gritty and heavy, and as I tried it against a tree-trunk it almost flew from my hand with the rebound. Then, stepping cautiously now, I made my way to where the wood was like a black wall in front of me.

Once inside it, I was as if lost. I held my breath for a second hoping I would not hear their voices, and yet fearful. Would it be better for them, and for me, too, if I should shout on Sabel and give them warning of my approach? Perhaps at this very moment Sabel might be saved from herself by the sound of my voice! The next moment I heard someone crashing and stumbling through the darkness towards me. My heart gave a great leap as I thought it was Sabel come to her senses before it was too late. Or had it already happened! I gripped the stake until it was part of me. Then, as I went forward a dark figure collided with me.

"Who is it? You, Jasper?" I raised the stick ready to bring it down on him. But the man, whoever it was, had collapsed in front of me. I lowered the stake and peered down at him.

"Who . . . who is it?" I knew from the build of him that it was not Jasper.

"It's me, Peele . . . Matt . . ."

"Matt?" For once I was glad it was Matt. So I had been mistaken after all. And to think I had cursed Justin and railed against the Almighty!

"Then what's happened?"

He had now risen to his feet and leaned back against a tree. I struck a match and held it to his face. I could only stare at him in horror. He gave a bitter laugh as I stared at his battered face and bleeding lips.

"You see what's happened." He turned aside to spit as the match went out. "That's what I got for trying to stop her."

"Her?" The old heaviness came back on me like lead. 'Aye—Sabel. She's with that bastard . . . I followed them . . . same as I been doing for weeks. . . . Knew he was up to no good." He clutched at my arm. "Peele, you've got to stop her. She doesn't know what she is doing . . . not herself she is. She . . . she just stood by not saying a word when he downed me——"

"You mean——?"

"Aye, I tried to reason with her—might just as well have reasoned with a bitch in heat. . . . That's how she strikes me, and he's just as bad. Not a word of warning, Peele, but bang . . . And not a chance to get on my feet after. . . . You wait——"

"Where are they now?"

"This side of Nanteos, that little dingle . . ."

I left him there and ran blindly through the whipping hazels and jaggig briars.

"Sabel! Sabel!"

I no longer cared, and shouted again and again. The sound of my voice even terrified me, mad though I was. Then I stopped and listened; no sound anywhere; nothing but the silence of the night and the far-away, unperturbed babble of the Lyswen.

"Sabel! . . . Sabel!"

I felt now that only my cry could save her. Then, when I came to the dingle, I saw them. They were standing on the edge of it, silhouetted against the sky. I gripped the stake with all my might and slowed down to a walk. My heart raced madly, and for a minute or so I had not the breath to say a word. Coming out from the wood I found the half darkness like day. I saw in a glance that Sabel's skirt was uncrumpled, her blouse buttoned to the neck. Her dark hair fell loosely over her right temple; but that, I realized, would have happened in pushing through the bushes on the way here.

I looked at Sabel for a full minute without saying a word, and although it was in a clearing in the Laesyrian woods that we stood, I had the feeling that a dark valley lay ahead of us. And as I continued to look at her and saw the expression on her face, I felt in full every grief and tribulation we should experience in our journey through it.

For a moment her eyes met mine defiantly, and I knew from the way she held herself that she was ready to give battle. Then, as I continued to look quietly at her, she lowered her eyes and I saw how her clenched hands relaxed and clutched at the folds of her skirt. At last I found my voice:

"Go home, you!" To my surprise my voice was hard and steady. "Just leave me to settle with this . . . this bastard."

As I heard myself say the word, I felt something snap inside me. As far as I was concerned he was no kin of mine. What had I to do with Justin's mistakes? As like as not there were plenty like him between here and Brecon.

"Go home!" I shouted as Sabel started to turn on me. "Haven't you done enough already? . . . You are nothing but a bitch."

"All right, Sabel." Jasper made to step between us. "Your father and I'll settle this. You leave us be . . . You're not afraid to go home by yourself?"

For answer she turned impulsively to him and kissed him before my very eyes. She turned defiantly to me:

"All right, I'll go. But whatever you argue or decide, you know my answer."

With that she turned and went, and left Jasper and me facing each other.

When all sounds of Sabel's footsteps had died away, I came to the point at once.

"I suppose this is your idea of paying us back in our own coin?"

He said nothing, and I could see that he was in two minds whether to take up my words or whether to try and reason things out. For the second the old sardonic, cocked eyebrow was that of Justin's, and I knew from the way he looked at me that he half wanted me to goad him to anger.

"Are you mad or what?" I went on. "Damme, haven't you any decency at all?"

"More than you have," he said slowly. "First you call me a bastard, then you call Sabel a bitch."

"I know." My anger was beginning to slip from me. But I still gripped the stake in case he should turn on me. After all, he hadn't hesitated to set about Felindre. "Just imagine what it means to us," I went on.

"Who? You and the family? Aren't you forgetting Sabel?"

I looked hard at him. There was no mistaking his earnestness.

"When . . . when did this start?"

"When I first saw her."

"That night by Justin's grave?" I could see them again as they stood there.

"Aye, right then. Look," he came a step nearer to me, "don't think the worst of us for this. I tell you, I've fought against it from the very start. . . . You know how it is."

I could say nothing.

"What about Sabel?" I asked at length.

"You must ask her yourself . . . You heard what she said."

I swallowed hard.

"Look," he said, "I'll do anything. I'll leave tonight for help—especially now Felindre's out of it."

"Aye, Felindre," I said. "Did you have to set on him like that?"

"Him?" He gave a short laugh. "He's out of it. I reckon he's still wondering what hit him."

"Do you think Sabel's your boy right of conquest now?" His eyes met mine squarely.

"I love her," he said quietly. "That's all I can say; and don't make it harder for me than it is."

For a second or so I felt a soaring inside me as I caught a glimpse, as it were, of the love and passion that possessed Sabel and him. Trust two such types to gravitate one to the other. But the situation was impossible. What, I asked myself, was the law of the church in cases like this. I tried to visualize the table at the back of the Common Prayer where it is laid down whom a man or maid may not marry. Even so, whatever the law, whether it be of the church or the land, even if it did permit marriage between first cousins, my very being rose in revolt against it. Jasper was too much a part of Justin. My daughter and Justin's son! Every instinct in me rose up against it. I shook my head violently.

"It is no good, Jasper. . . . You know the word for it, don't you?"

"What word?"

"Incest—that's what it is."

"You needn't explain," he said quietly. "I know how you feel. Don't think I haven't been over and over it myself, but——"

"But what?" I felt nothing but pity for him now.

"Sabel doesn't see it like that."

I put my hand on his shoulder. So it was Sabel who was using the spur. As Grett had once said, it was easy to see who she was taking after. If anything, Justin's blood was stronger in her than in his own son.

"Say something, uncle."

It was the first time he had ever addressed me in that way.

"Don't 'uncle' me." I spoke as lightly as I could so as not to add to his hurt. "You call me 'Ned'. Justin would laugh if he could hear you."

"What do you reckon he'd have said to all this?"

I imagined the grin on Justin's face and the wicked upward twist of his eyebrow.

"He'd have belted you. . . . Told you to get off your own doorstep."

"And try my luck in Brecon on a fair night, eh?"

I had no answer to that.

"What are your plans?" I asked him at length. "You know this can't go on."

"Why not? Diajn, I'm only her first cousin. There's plenty of first cousins marry. Look at Royalty!" He then started to enumerate instances of people around Brecon who, though related, had been churched and blessed.

"I know," I said. "But you don't understand. Even if I weren't against it——"

"Why are you against it? Why? Is it because I'm your brother's bastard, as you called me just now?"

"No. Nothing to do with it that is. Listen, it's not only me, but there's Grett to be considered." I started to tell him of the old feud between us and Grett's family.

"But that's all over and done with!" he protested. "No need to tell me about that. I was told all about it the first week I was here. Besides, Grett is one of the family now. What's the old quarrel got to do with it? There's only Grett left. . . . Don't tell me her family won't rest because your brother's son wants to marry her daughter!"

smiled sadly to myself. As he said, there was only

Grett left. Jeff Ellis? Jeff was only a name linked in tragedy with Justin; and as for John and Mary Ellis—I doubted if Sabel even remembered them. But Grett was still left.

“Well?”

I told him how Justin had stood in relationship to the old quarrel. Although the feud had originally started between father and John Ellis, it was Justin and Jeff who had kept it alive. “Don’t you see,” I finished up, “Justin stood for us. He was the champion on our side. . . . And deep in her heart—and you can’t blame her—Grett must still be thinking that, but for Justin, Jeff would be alive today——”

“But Jeff Ellis asked for it,” interrupted Jasper. “My father was all against the bull-baiting. Diain, she told me that herself.”

“Grett did? When?”

“The other day . . . It was the first real talk that I’d had with her.”

“All right, all right! But it doesn’t help, Jasper. You can’t get away from it: you are Justin’s son——”

“Can’t alter that—not that I would want to now, even if I could. But if anybody’s to blame for Jeff’s death and my father’s, then Grett is as much to blame as anybody. You, too. If you two hadn’t been in love, it wouldn’t have come to what it did. . . . So your argument about Grett being against it on those grounds is just talk and nothing else.”

“Then why don’t you go on with it,” I said quietly. “You say you have fought against it. Why? Why bother since you’ve got an answer to every argument against it?”

He took out his cigarettes and offered me one.

“I asked for that.” He gave me a wry smile as the match spurted and flared between us. “All right then . . . The thing I’m up against is that like you I can’t get it

out my stomach that we're related. . . . There's something too naked about it. . . . I feel she's like a half-sister to me—that's the trouble."

"Tell me," I steeled myself as I put the question, but I had to know, "how far has it gone between you? . . . Is it . . . too far gone for it to stop?"

"You mean . . .?" He laughed and tossed his cigarette from him. "Damme, she kissed me for the first time tonight, here in front of you."

I could only stare at him in amazement. But there was nothing I could do to help him or Sabel.

"Don't take it hard," I said to him. "You see how impossible it is . . . I don't see any way out of it for either of you. What the old people will say I don't know. Besides, now you've belted Matt, it will be all over the place by tomorrow. . . . Why don't you look for somebody else——"

"Somebody else!" He swore. "Uffern, do you think I don't know my own mind? I tell you, I can't think of anything but her! Do you think I'd have stayed on at Trewern if it hadn't been for Sabel? . . . But don't worry, don't worry. I'll settle this my own way."

He turned suddenly and left me. I called after him, afraid he would take it into his head not to return to Trewern. He made no reply, and after a while there was nothing to be heard but the rustling of the leaves around me and the cold tinkle of the river. Slowly, I made my way out of the wood Justin, Jeff; Grett and myself; and now Sabel and Jasper. Where was it all going to end? That dread night in Alltwen barn had been only a halt, a pause. It was to this hour that events had moved ever since I had first fallen in love with Grett. Perhaps it was earlier than that even. But it was no use going back in time. This very night had not done with us yet. . . .

I prayed that the old people would be in bed by the time I reached the house; Grett, too. How I would begin to tell them I did not know. Once again it was fallen to my lot to carry them news which would bring them low. And all the time, all the way home that night, the word "incest" persisted in my thoughts like a finger fretting a raw wound.

Chapter 16

ALL that I had ever felt for Justin, all the love and tenderness that was in me for Grett—all that and more, too, went out to Sabel that night as she sat with me while the others were asleep upstairs.

When I got home the place was in darkness and I was thankful for it. The old house seemed lost in its first sleep. There was not a sound anywhere. Hardly a leaf moved in the full sycamores; and yet, despite it all, it seemed to me as I stood there that the very stillness was unquiet. When I came to the door, I made the sign of the cross on the lintel of it.

Once inside, I lit the candle which mother or Grett had left ready for me on the table. The supper cloth was turned back over the wheat loaf and the milk jug. I looked around eagerly. There, under his chair, were the old man's boots where he had slipped them off before winding the clock; mother's lay turned towards the fender, the rabbit-fur socks half out. . . . There too were Grett's, and by the door were Moc's, mutton-greased hobnails. Then, as I saw Sabel's briar-scratched brown shoes, my heart leapt inside me. So she was in! I groped in one of the gold lustre-ware jugs on the dresser for the cigarettes which I always kept in reserve. . . .

I must have sat there for an hour or more, my thoughts going this way and that like bats flurried in a small space, when I heard a creak on the stairs. I turned round in my chair and there, standing in the doorway, was Sabel.

Her nightdress clung to her and her hair fell down over her shoulders.

She came straight to me, just as she used to when she was small. Then, as I took her on my knees, she started to cry, her whole body shaking as she fought to keep her sobs from waking the others. I felt nearer to her than ever before.

Bit by bit, she started to tell me about herself and Jasper. Yes, she told me everything that night did Sabel. And though I knew I was being false to myself and to Grett, I heard myself reassuring her that everything would work out for the best in the end. Yet even as I whispered it to her, my ears listened for the slightest sound of Jasper's return. The candlelight threw half her face into dark relief so that her nose was as straight as a line and the shadows from her eyelashes fell dark on her pale cheeks. She fell asleep at last, her cheeks wet against mine. I dared not look down at her for her nightdress had slipped a little over her shoulder and her loveliness was not for me to look upon. Then, as I moved in my chair, the old man called down to see if I was still up. Sabel slipped off my knee at once and hurried upstairs. The old man's irritable words rang in my ears for minutes after. A blessing it was, I thought, that their unconscious irony had no meaning for him yet.

"What are you doing down there?" he had rasped, his voice harsh and gruff at being kept from his sleep. "Haven't you got a bed to go to? Don't know what this place is coming to . . . No rest for a man there is? First Sabel creeping in, and now you. Enough to wake the dead it is. . . . Get to bed, it's tomorrow already!"

It was long, however, before I heard him snoring. As for me, I still sat where I was. For once, I could not

go up to Grett. What she would be thinking to herself I dared not think, for the old man had surely wakened the whole house with his bellowing. But as I say, I dared not go up to her. All I knew was that the morning would come too soon. Three o'clock struck, and then the half hour, but there was still no sign of the dawn over the dark Vans. How many in the parish, I wondered, were awake with me at this hour. Grett, Sabel . . . Jasper? I continued to look out through the window. Fragments of what Sabel had told me of her love and Jasper's came into my mind, and well I knew the anguish of love that was on them. Even so had Grett and I suffered when every hand was against us. . . .

I thought, too, of Jasper, and imagined him walking the roads in the darkness, his thoughts for ever on Sabel and Trewern. . . .

The night ticked on. Little sounds and creaks came from the walls and beams as if the house itself was in troubled sleep. And then, at last, I must have fallen asleep, for when I sat up with a sudden start I saw that the candle had gutted itself out and the window was already pale with light. But it was not the flush of dawn behind the Vans that made me put my hands before my eyes. The dream I had had was still too vivid before me. I dared not fall asleep after that. The sight of Jasper and Sabel naked and entwined together in embrace was too much to bear.

At last, just before it was time for the old man to get up, I tiptoed up to Jasper's room. As I knew, his bed had not been slept in. Then, as I stood there, my mind already envisaging what this would mean to Sabel, not counting the old people, I turned round and saw Sabel standing behind me. I reached her just as she swayed on her feet. Then, carrying her as gently as I could, I laid her on Jasper's bed. As she came round she called

Jasper's name, and then half rose and clutched at me as though she were drowning. At that moment Grett came into the room, father behind her, and then mother and Moc.

"Jasper! . . . Jasper!" Sabel was still calling for him.

I looked mutely at them and understood from the terror in their eyes that there was no need just then to tell them what had happened.

Chapter 17

A DISPENSATION of Providence it is that when we look back over the years we remember best the days that were golden and touched with love and tenderness. That is why, though many years have passed since then, that I cannot bring myself to tell of the day that followed Jasper's departure from us. Besides, not fair to the dead it would be to record the terrible and bitter things that were said when we tried to talk things over. All that was worst in the old man showed itself again. As for mother, she went about as though she had been stunned. We lost her after tea, and it was Moc who overtook her on Doll as he saw her making her way to the Tavarn. But Jasper was not at the Tavarn, nor had anyone we asked seen or heard aught of him. In my fright I went down to where he had left me the night before and walked the river right up to where it was only a stream below the Van lake.

When I got back to Trewern it was to a silent house. Sabel would not come out of her room. Grett, too, seemed far away from any of us. When I tried to catch her eye she looked so alien and strange that I thought for a moment she was someone I had never known. Still, the day passed, and the next, but no news came of Jasper. Sabel went each morning to meet Lewsin, and times I was afraid that she, too, might take it in her head to leave us. As for myself, I kept away from the house as much as I could. I walked the fields and saw the clover flowers ripen and scatter their precious seed, but it was no use thinking of

starting the harvest while we were at sixes and sevens. Oh those days of that sad summer! Wherever I went the sweet loveliness and innocence of the earth and sky mocked me. The smell of the unmown hay rose sweet and fresh in the air. At times a breath of it would come and bring with it a stray whiff of honeysuckle. And whenever I looked at the tall foxgloves or at the wild roses in the arching hedges, it seemed as though the summer had touched everything with its passion. Gold, gold was on everything; beauty was abroad, spendthrift and prodigal. But this only opened the old wound again. Wherever I went, I was mocked at every turn by what was so fresh and innocent.

Night after night I sat in father's chair, long after the rest of them had gone to bed. From their room above me I would hear the old people talking and talking in low tones. Times I would think they had stopped; then, after a while, it would start all over again. Once, too, I heard Grett as she tiptoed across the landing and tried Sabel's door. It must, however, have been locked because her feet were slow and heavy as she went back to her room. So, with unrest in every room, the nights went by. It was not till the Monday after that Lewsin tipped me he had brought Sabel a letter that morning. The post-mark, as far as he had been able to make it out, was a village outside Brecon.

I can tell you now what was in that letter, because all the letters that passed between Jasper and Sabel are in front of me. I read them over and over to myself and see mirrored in them a love which was as great as if not greater than the love which Grett and I found for each other. That first letter which Lewsin brought Sabel and which kept her all day down in the Allt was written a few days after he left us. He had sent it from Llanspyddyd,

a few miles this side of Brecon and the date on it was the 18th of June, 1913.

DEAR SABEL,

Perhaps I shouldn't be writing to you because you must be having enough to put up with without hearing from me. But I feel I must write you so that you will understand why I had to leave you there in the lurch.

After talking with your father that night, and I believe he understood exactly what our love means to us, though he pretended to be against it—after I left him, I began to think things over. I walked right up through your Allt, but when I came in sight of the house, I felt I had no right to go further. I stayed there in the trees until I saw your father go by, and if I didn't know it was him I might have thought it was an old man. That made me think. I began to realize what it would mean if I stayed on at Trewern. Perhaps you don't think I love you, especially now that I have left you in the lurch. But it's just the opposite, Sabel. The truth is, I couldn't hold out much longer. How do you think I could carry on pretending there was nothing between us when the very thought of you, let alone you yourself, is enough to drive me mad. Besides, they would all be against it. Your mother had guessed from the very start, and I saw how she changed towards me as the weeks went by. And you know, because we've gone over this time and time again, that this would break her heart. We have got to realize what it would mean to her to see her own flesh and blood marry the son of the man who was her brother's enemy. You've got to see that, Sabel. Then there's the old people. They have suffered enough already. I suppose it was as much as they could stand when I turned up last autumn; especially me—a bastard. No, I wasn't even hurt when your father called me that the other night. It didn't even touch me because I put

myself in his boots. As for what hē called you, it must have been what that chap, Felindre, had said to him, because it was what he called you when I clouted him. By the way, if ever he bothers you, just let me know. One word, and I'll get Tal Einon and Twm Dafis, and between us, we'll settle him and those yobs.

I got no plans at the moment. I am going on to Brecon today. Perhaps I'll get a job as waggoner somewhere, anything till the wood-cutting starts again. But the Fagddu won't see me again.

About you, I don't know. I can't get you out of my mind. I keep thinking of those days last winter. A pity those old trees in the Fagddu are cut down and carted away. I made my axe sing of my love for you in every stroke I cut into them. Do you know that for nights on end I walked over to the church to stand by my father's grave. No, not to be near him, but because it was there I first saw you really and fell in love with you. And then you walked off with that Matt Felindre! How I kept my hands off him I don't know. But there you are, I didn't know how you felt about me. Then the randy-boos in the Tavarn night after night, I did it just to get you out of my mind. But it was no good. For two pins I'd have come over to Trewern to make it up with your family, just to have a chance of seeing you. It was the "Peele" in me I suppose that kept me from doing it. Oh, I could go on writing to you, especially when I think how it was your face that I saw first when I came to after the accident. Do you remember the first time we talked down by the Lyswen? I was you came out with it first. Remember how you looked at me and asked what was I going to do about it? What I should have done was to put my arms round you there and then. But I dared not, Sabel. You don't know what you do to a chap.

Well, this is no time to be writing a love-letter. It

ought to be good-bye. But I can't say it. All I can do is to try and fight against this love I have for you. By right, I shouldn't even write to you, but if I don't get rid of my feelings, I'll go off my head. If it would only help, I'd pick up the first girl I'd meet in Brecon, just like my father did. But it wouldn't help, Sabel; it wouldn't help. And anyway, I am finished with all that. As far as I am concerned, there is only you. You are part of me.

Well, it's no good writing more. I love you, but I must keep away from you. If you want to write to me, drop me a line care of The Coracle. That will always find me. But don't ask me to come back.

No more now. Please ask Moc to put my things in the tin trunk and keep them for me. If you do write, please send me your photo, and one of my father, too, if you can get one.

Your cousin,
JASPER PEELE.

PS. Yes, it's Peele now, and that's how it's going to be, too.

Trewern.
June 21st.

OH, JASPER, JASPER,

What can I say to you? I am no good at writing letters and there is so much I want to say to you. Your letter went on and on as if you were talking to me, and here I am with so much to tell you, and I don't know how to begin. Don't worry too much about me. They are leaving me to myself, not saying a word about you at all. Well, I can put up with that all right. All I want these days is to think of you. But why did you go away like that? We hadn't done anything wrong. It wasn't our fault that we fell in love, and how can they expect us to give up our love just because of that old quarrel? I wish the boot was on the other foot. I mean, you

ought to be me, and I ought to be you. Things would be different then. We Peeles always get our own way. That's how grandfather is, and Justin was the same. Take first, and explain after; that's our motto. But there is no good me talking. Here I am, and there, miles away, are you. Don't think that you being away is going to make any difference to me. This is the first time I have ever loved anybody. And you are not to worry any more about the others I have been with. You see, I know you through and through. They were nothing to me, though I did think Matt might be the one. That is, until you came. But not one of them ever got me. You have got to believe that. Someday I'll prove it to you. You will know then. Not that it was easy to keep like this. I'm only human, and if I'd loved one of them like I do you, then it would have been different.

They have started on the hay here, and I have had had to pull myself together and help. Grandmother understands perfectly and she talked with me for a long time last night. Of course, naturally, with her you couldn't do anything wrong. She has packed all your things so tidy, and Moc has put your tin box in the parlour.

Oh, Jasper, I can't stand this for long. If I knew you would be in Brecon tonight, I'd jump on Doll and be with you in two hours. But don't worry. I'll never come to you until you ask me to. All you've got to do is ask. If it is wrong for first cousins to marry, then I'll risk it without a ring. Do you understand what I mean? I don't think of marriage lines, ring, or even children. All I want is you. Mother knows this, that is why she is so worried. She has often said that I am more like Justin than I'm like father. Perhaps she is right. After all that Moc had told me about him, I used to dream about him night after night. And when I heard about what had happened on the night of that

fair when he met your mother, I wished it had been me he'd met. When, when I saw you, I felt as if it was him.

Do write to me as often as you can. I am afraid your letter won't last long. I carry it with me all day—no more low necks for me!!! Shocked—are you?

No more tonight. We got two fields to caru in tomorrow. Oh yes, Elias carpenter and the others are giving the old-fashioned looks. As for Matt Felindre, don't worry. If he says a word to me, he'll get a mouthful. Oh dear, this letter is just gossip. Come back, Jasper. Come back soon, I can't keep on loving like this. I want your arms around me. Just that.

R'wyn dy garu,
SABEL.

PS. Here is a photo of me. I don't like it, but it's the only one I have. I took this snap of Justin from father's drawer. S.

c/o The Coracle,
Brecon.
June 29th, 1913.

MY BELOVED SABEL,

Why are you making it so hard for me? Do you think you are helping me when through every word of your letter I can feel your heart beating against me? It's no good, I tell you. No good can come of this love of ours. We've got to think of the future. You say you would come to me, ring or no ring, as you say. How long do you think it would last, Sabel? You see, I know you. It would not be long before you would hate me, because I am you who have everything to lose. Being the "giver" that you are, you would hate me for being a "taker". You'll not agree with this, I know. But I am right.

Now about me. I've got a job with the fair people. They've been here a week, and I've got a job with the

horses and helping with various jobs. The pay is good, twenty-five a week and all found. It will do me until the autumn. We are moving up towards Rhayader way tomorrow. Drop me a line to the Post Office there.

Thank you for the photographs. I hope your father will not miss the one of my father. As for your snap, it is you. It must have been taken when you were not looking. It is as though you were in front of me, your head thrown back and your hands clasped behind it, with the trees and the far-off Vans as the scenery. And best of all, you are wearing that open-necked, brown-striped blouse that I loved so much. When I look at it, I say to myself—"Sabel Peele, Trewern." Yes, it is there you belong, Sabel. And I'm beginning to realize that that is where I belong, too. What wouldn't I give to be walking down through the Allt now and to find you waiting for me by our footbridge over the Lyswen. There will never be a time like last winter and spring again. The nights when I walked the lanes hoping I'd meet you at every turn! And then those days after I'd got up for the first time after my accident. Do you remember the nights when we all sang round the fireside? That hymn tune "Llandinam" is in my ears all the time, no matter what rag-time the roundabout is blaring.

Hold out, Sabel. Don't give in. We've got to fight against our love. But I will say this. If ever it gets too hard for you, tell me first. I can wait, you see, because it is enough for me to be in love with you. Even though I fight against it, it does not mean I shall ever stop loving you. I just must not give in to it. I daren't write more, because if I once let myself go, nobody on earth could keep me from you.

Hold out, Sabel, and so, God help
me, will I—your cousin,

JASPER.

PS. Do you see it, that word "cousin"? Just

remember that, Sabel, and don't make it harder for me than it is already.

Trewern,
July 28th.

DEAR JASPER,

Over seven weeks have passed since you went away, and all I have to show for them is six letters. I go to meet Lewsin every morning, and, fair play to them at home here, they never show that they even guess we are writing to each other. And now I have something to tell you. Things have come to a head here. Grandfather came home from the Parish Meeting the other night with his face like thunder. I knew as soon as he came in and started looking at his hand and cutting grandmother short, that it was about me. You never saw him in one of his moods, did you? He was on his best behaviour then, of course. But he is coming out in his true colours now. Well, it *was* about me. They are saying in the parish that I am in trouble—you know what that means—and that that is the reason I haven't been seen about since you went away. And as he came out with it, he had to look me up and down—as if it would show in a few weeks! I was almost tempted to stick my stomach out as he looked at me. You should have heard grandmother, though. She turned on him like a flash. Temper! She put grandfather in his place at once. The result was, after things quietened down, that I had to go to church on Sunday, just to give people the lie.

We all went together. Moc said it was a pity you weren't with us, and you should have seen the look grandmother gave him. He's the apple of her eye all right. I wore the green costume I had on when you first met me. I could feel everybody staring me up and down as I walked in. A pity it wasn't true, Jasper. I mean it . . . But never mind about that.

When we came out after church, none of the girls

would look at me—as if I didn't know enough about them, anyway! Rhys blacksmith and his set were all grinning as I passed. The next thing I knew was that Matt Felindre came straight up to me. Father tried to step in between him and me, but he pushed father to one side. Then before he could say a word to me, Moc came up from behind. You could have heard a pin drop. And you should have seen Moc. No wonder everybody was afraid of your father and him. But Matt didn't seem to care. "Out of the way," he shouted. "I got to speak to Sabel." Then he tried to push Moc to one side. The next thing we knew was that Matt was lying sprawled on Graiglas grave. I felt sorry for him, but he shouldn't have tried to get past Moc. Vicar came out and looked at me as I was dirt. Rhys blacksmith and Alltybrain carried Matt to the Parish Room. They say there's a splash of blood like a black stain on the Graiglas grave-stone. Well, our name is mud now, and Moc does nothing but threaten that he will do the same to anyone who tries to interfere with me or the family.

Vicar came over last night and I heard him say that they should stop you and me from writing to each other—which proves that they knew all the time. But I don't take any notice of that. And they know me better than to try and stop me.

Oh, Jasper, you seem so far away now. When you were in Brecon I felt you were within reach of me. I hope you get a steady job soon and leave that fair. I feel at times that I can't go on like this. I read your letters over and over and visit all the places where we used to meet in secret before they found us out. But it's no good; I'm not like you. I can't live on memories. Look, nothing stopped my father and mother from getting married, and see how happy they are, even though they've got your father's and Jeff Ellis's deaths to account for.

Come to me soon, Jasper. If you loved me you would want me as much as I want you. . . .

SABEL.

So the letters go on, right through August and into September. Then, at about the time the fair came to Abergavenny, there is this:

Trewern,
Sept. 26th.

OH MY BELOVED JASPER,

I can't believe it. I keep saying to myself that something will happen to stop you from coming to-morrow night. Yes, yes; I'll be waiting for you on the Doldre bridge. Nobody will see us there. I'll be there from nine o'clock on. But I must be careful not to give the game away. I want to shout and sing. Of course, you'll have to put up with me as I am. I'll have to come in my everyday clothes, and I'll wear the striped blouse you like so much, though what you see in it is beyond me.

We are busy on the corn here. Oh Jasper, I can't believe you are coming. Thank goodness the weather is fine. It will be full moon and your old Vans—you are as silly as father about them—will be looking their best. I am going to read the *Song of Songs* tonight. Thank you for telling me about them. I never dreamed there was such a love song in the Bible; but there you are, if anybody ought to know about love, it would be Solomon! Oh, I am so light-hearted. Can't you feel my heart beating against yours already?

SABEL.

Chapter 18

As I looked around me on the cornfield that September night the feeling came on me that it was on just such a night that Grett and I had worked in the moonlight in the week before Justin's death. Just as on that night, the mountains in the distance rose blue against the moon, and the Vans were sharp and clean-cut as if with a knife. But on this night I had no heart to tell Grett any englyn. Not that her beauty no longer moved me. The moonlight softened all that the years had laid on her. Her breasts were still round and pointed under her blouse, and the apron-band drawn tight around her showed up her slenderness. As I pitched the sheaves up to her, she took them in her arms and saw to it that the load was evenly distributed, taking care, of course, that most of the weight should be well to the front and rammed tightly against the uprights.

At the other end of the field, father and Moc were pitching to Sabel. As I heard her gay laugh and banter, I imagined that at last she was no longer grieving and moping after Jasper.

We had carted since the early afternoon, stopping only for tea and early supper. The old man would have it that the weather was about to break, though as far as I could see there was no call for any hurry. There wasn't a cloud in the sky, and the whisper of what wind there was in the sycamores had no hint in it of rain. True, the glass had dropped, but when the moon came up full and molten-round over the Vans, there was no halo

around it. The tinkle of the river came clear and light up through the Allt, a sure sign with us that there was nothing to fear for the next few days. Even so, nothing could turn the old man; and as this was the last field, we were in no mood to argue. No doubt he was thinking of what had happened a year or two back when the weather broke half-way through the harvest. We had waited anxiously for the October moon thinking it would pull the rain away. But no good had come of it. A wet moon it was, with the nether horn curved so steep that it held rain enough until November came and went, and by that time what was left of the harvest was not fit for bedding. "Never again," he had said, "even if we have to cart on the Sabbath."

The gambo swayed and creaked on to the next stooked row. Across the field I could hear Moc and father forcing the pace. I looked up at Grett and smiled as I heard Sabel cap one of Moc's oaths with one of her own. Grett shook her head.

"She's been the same all day. I can't make her out. She . . . she hasn't been like this since before Jasper went."

She smoothed back her hair with a perplexed lift of her hand as father called on Sabel and Moc to watch their tongues.

"Don't worry." My pitchfork flashed blue as I drew it away from the pikeful I hoisted up to her. "It's young blood, Grett. Girls of her age don't mope for ever. . . . It's got to come out somehow. Let's be thankful she's getting over it. Fast!" I led the mare on to the next row.

By the moon it was close on eight or so. I looked over the field. At the rate we were going we would be finished by ten. What a night it was! Now that the moon had lifted clear of the Vans they had lost their grim blackness and were now touched with a silvery blue.

Under the vast, calm arch of the sky they seemed far away. I could trace the course of the Sawdde by the mist that showed white between the steep woods of Allt-y-brain and along by Cwmsidan down to Graig Ddu.

"What are you thinking?"

I looked up at Grett as she spoke. From her waist up she was against the moon, like a figure half carved from a mass of rock.

"Nothing. . . . Why do you ask?"

She put her head on one side just as she used to do when she was Grett Rhos Dirion and asking me if I loved her.

"You were so far away, Ned . . ."

I stuck the pitchfork into the ground and half leaned against it, gripping it with both hands and twisting a foot around it to keep the balance.

"Grett . . ."

She leaned down and took my hand. As I smoothed her fingers I thought how much better it would be for her to wear gloves to protect her from the thistles.

"What is it?" Her voice was soft and hushed again, just as it had been in our courting days.

"Do you remember our first harvest here? . . . The moonlight . . . and how I kept on reciting Trebor Mai to you? Doesn't this bring it all back to you?"

For answer she reached down with both hands and I had to step on to the middle spoke to kiss her. But even as I kissed her, I felt the old sadness come back on me. To think of those nights was to see myself riding home a few nights afterwards from Alltwen barn. Grett must have felt it, too, for her kiss was only a soft parting of her lips as if a sad smile of remembrance had stolen over her mouth in the midst of it. When I stepped down from the wheel, I saw that her head was turned in the direction of Alltwen. Then, as if linking Justin with

Jasper and Sabel, she looked across to where father and Moc were already leading their gambo towards the gate.

As the gambo swayed and jolted past us, Sabel waved her hand. All we could see of her was her dark hair and the moon showing up the stripes of her brown blouse.

"Get a move on!" the old man shouted to us. "Be along in quarter of an hour, so's we don't clash in the lane. . . . Another five or six loads and we're done." He tugged at Brown's head. "Hold fast, Sabel! Come Brown! Gaseg!"

Another five or six loads he had said, and then we'd be done! All we would have to look forward to then would be the Thanksgiving, and then the winter . . . I wondered if Jasper would come back with the wood-fellers. But though I longed for the sight of him, I prayed he would not return. . . .

Grett and I took it leisurely now, for the top of the corner upright had been almost out of sight when the other gambo left. By the time we reached the end of our row the load rose between me and the moon.

"Are you coming down?" I asked.

Grett lay flat on top of the load.

"No. I'll stay here . . . It's nice and warm. Just like being in bed."

"Fast, then!" I shouted. "Father and Moc'll be finished now."

I shouldered the pitchfork and managed the gate without hubbing the posts.

The hedges each side of the lane scraped against the load, and the moonlight caught the glistening straws that hung in wisps from the briars and hazels. Seen in the moonlight the outbuildings rose black-roofed and sharp-angled against the sky. I could almost feel the moonlight flowing through the leaves and rippling, as

they stirred, where it flooded the yard and glimmered on the white-washed walls. The mast of the ricks stood truncated and squarely set. I could see with half an eye that it would not twist, nor would it need propping even if the fall in the glass brought a gale before it set.

As I pulled up, the old man came half-way to meet us. I saw at once there was something amiss. Moc stood behind him, his shadow misshapen and squat as it spread from his feet. The mare shuddered behind me. The jingle of the harness sounded loud in the silence that had suddenly become heavy and charged with foreboding.

"What's up?" I asked. "Anything happened?"

For a moment the old man couldn't speak. He was in his shirt sleeves, his waistcoat open and gaping over his stomach. The sweat on his forehead shone like oil.

"It's . . . it's Sabel," he muttered. "I've never heard anything like it."

My stomach turned to water at his words and I felt a nervous tightening around my heart.

"Sabel? What is it? What had she done?" There was no mistaking the alarm in Grett's voice as she tried to stand upright on top of the load.

"Done!" The old man threw out his arms in exasperation. "Just gone off she has, just like that. Not a word to anyone, but off across the field there as soon as she came down from the load. No wonder she's been so perky all day!"

"Help me down, Edwin!" Grett was trying to get down. I stuck the prong of my pitchfork into the solid side of the load and guided her foot on to the handle. With a quick jump she was at my side.

"Which way did she go?"

The old man pointed in the direction of the Allt. I thought again of the hour I had spent outside Maesyrarian

woods. But this time it was not Jasper. I looked at Moc and he nodded grimly back at me.

"No need to ask where she's gone," went on father. "Now that Jasper's gone and forgotten, she's back with Felindre." He looked angrily at Grett: "I've warned you enough about her, Grett; she's just man-mad, that's what she is."

I saw Grett go still and tense. The moonlight on her face seemed brighter than ever.

"No need to say that there was." I turned angrily on the old man. He gnawed his lower lip as if knowing he had gone too far. He turned to Grett:

"I am sorry, Grett . . . but you know how I feel. Leaving us like this when every minute counts. I tell you, I'm finished with Sabel now. Finished. And you can tell her that from me. . . . Ah well," he turned to Moc and me, "we got to carry on. You pitch up your load, Ned; and, Moc, you do ours."

Without a word, and as if to make amends for Sabel's absence, Grett started to climb the slender ladder to the top of the rick. Moc swarmed up the pole of his gambo like a giant spider. The old man backed Doll until the back of my gambo was against the rick. And then we started pitching, Moc from one side of the rick and myself from the other. Between the two of us, Grett had as much as she could manage. From time to time the old man shouted some instruction or other: "Over to the other side, Moc" . . . "Look out, Grett, or you'll get a twist on her an' we'll be the laugh of the parish."

I understood his anxiety and pride. It was only the year before that Ty Gwyn's rick had looked like a corkscrew. What with the supports they had had to buttress it with, anyone would have thought it was a bonfire ready for the tinder.

Grett took each sheaf as I pitched it to her as if it were

a changeling and placed it where father directed. As for me, I worked mechanically. What on earth was it that had come over Sabel like this? I knew that Grett was worried, too. She worked above me without a word, and time and again I saw how she turned her head to look in the direction of the Alt.

As Moc and I kept pace with alternate pikefuls, the rick rose higher and higher. I could see that Grett was now beginning to draw it in. Another load and it would be conical, and all we would need if it came to rain would be the big square of tarpaulin which we always used until the thatching.

"More to the middle, Grett!" The old man was now more himself, no doubt pleased at the way the three of us were getting on with it. He walked around the rick, giving it a push here and there to test its stability. "He'll have it over in a minute," grunted Moc as we saw Grett stagger to keep her balance. "Think it'll take another load, Ned?"

I looked up at the rick. The top of it was now the whole length of my pitchfork above my head, and Grett had to reach down to gather each pikeful to her. Over the firs below the rickyard I could see the old Vans. Year in year out, there they were on our skyline, as if they were impassively watching over our destinies. I remembered them as I had seen them on the day of my wedding, the arch of the church door framing them as I turned my head to see Grett coming up the aisle on her father's arm. That golden heyday of our lives! Grett and I, Justin, father and mother, Moc, Jeff, and the rest of them, squire, vicar, Dico . . . Little wonder that my wedding night had been a hymn of praise to all I had loved. But now, tonight, it was not so much Grett and myself, but Sabel. . . . I thought, too, of Jasper, and wondered. . . .

The sound of Moc's pike shivering against the floorboards of his gambo broke on my thoughts. Up it went with its crown of corn, and he had to give a little jump before Grett could gather it to her. And then it happened. My blood froze in me as I heard a half scream from Grett. The next moment I heard a dull, heavy thud on the other side of the rick. I was there before Grett moaned. She was lying face downwards, her body limp and with one leg twisted under her. Not daring to move her, I put my hand under her heart.

"Grett! Grett!"

Despite the terrible trembling that was on me, I held my breath as I pressed my hand against her soft breast. The beat of her heart was only just noticeable.

"Is she . . . ?" Behind me the old man's voice quavered with fear.

I shook my head and put my ear to her lips. She was breathing with difficulty.

"Don't move her," said father. "Moc and I'll get a gate . . . I'll call your mother."

I knelt there at Grett's side. In my mind I could still hear the soft, heavy thud her body had made when she fell.

"Grett! Grett Rhos Dirion!" But she made no response. My hand was still between her breast and the ground, the weight of it warm and stirring spasmodically as her breath came and went.

For a while I could not even think. It was as though everything had died inside me. I turned my head, wondering if everything was in proper perspective and hoping I should find the Vans were not there and this was only some other nightmare. But all was too real. The Vans, the Allt, the white-washed walls of the house were still there and mocked me with their solid permanence.

I looked down again at Grett. Her hair had fallen

loose and was about her shoulders. I wanted to lift her in my arms, to bring her round with my kisses. But I remembered that I must not move her. . . . And now father and Moc were back again, bearing the unhinged door of the barn between them. They had even brought the trap rug with them.

They placed the tarred door alongside Grett.

"Right, Moc, you take her shoulders. You, Ned, support her middle, and I'll take her feet."

Grett gave a little moan as we lifted her and then placed her, still face downwards, on the spread rug. Then, father and Moc between them set off towards the house. Their shadows stretched behind them like a pall.

Mother was out in the yard as we came through the gate. At any other time I would have run to support her. She came running towards us, her body leaning forward as she half stumbled past the midden and her white apron lifting with her movement.

"Has . . . has she come round yet?"

"Not yet. Is the bed ready and plenty of blankets?" Father was supporting the burden with his hands behind him. He did not stop or turn his head. "No fuss now, Anne. . . . We don't know how bad it is. . . ."

But mother made father and Moc stop while she bent over Grett. Her hands explored Grett's body. From time to time Grett moaned, and the sound of her agony brought me back to myself. I gave a great sob. God in heaven, it was Grett who was lying there so still in front of me! I swayed on my feet.

"Steady, Ned. Hold up!" Moc's arm was like a half-hoop of iron around me.

"One of you go down to the Post Office!" Mother straightened herself up. "Get doctor at once!"

"No time for that," said father. "You, Ned, get the cob—"

"Let me go," said Moc. "Ned's place's with Grett."

"No time to waste," said father. "Ned'll do it in half the time, he's lighter than you. . . . Go on, Ned! We'll get her upstairs. . . . Take the Dyfnant road past Col. You'll be there in half an hour."

I tore off across the yard. As luck would have it, the bay cob was in his stall. It was only before tea that Sabel had ridden him down to the Post. Sabel! My heart ached for her as I realized what this would mean to her when she would hear, and she not at home when this was happening to her mother. . . . I tugged at the saddle-girth and as I did so, I realized that it was my old saddle, the one I had used on the night Justin died.

As I rode into the yard, I saw them going in through the passage, mother lighting the way for them with the table lamp. Then Moc's back came between me and Grett. But there was no time to lose now. The crest of the Doldre came into sight before I realized I had put the lane between me and the house.

The memory of that ride will always be with me. It has come between me and the ride I took from Alltwen when Justin's blood was on my hands. Little wonder it is that whenever now I hear the sound of hoofs, my heart gives a sudden start and a great fear and trembling come over me.

Soon, I was in the Dyfnant. The sound of the river was loud in the valley and above me the moon rode the tops of the trees. The strange thing was that though my heart was crying inside me, I had eyes and ears for everything that was around me. So it is; sorrow, they say, heightens and quickens the perceptions more than does joy. It was so with me on that night whatever. I saw everything. More than that, too; I could see Grett everywhere.

Before I came to Col, a group of young fellows flung themselves against the hedge-bank as I tore by. I heard one of them shouting my name; it was Rod Brynmair, I think. But I had no time to stop. They would hear soon enough.

When I got to Llandovery it was close on ten. My trousers were clammy with sweat, and the steer rose from the cob's back as I looped the reins over the doctor's railings.

It was I who led the way back that night. Then, as we came to Trewern, a nameless terror came over me. The blur of the rick rose behind the house like a broken column. I was off the cob in a twinkling and helped the doctor down. He bent his knees and gave a great gasp of relief. Moc came out to meet us.

"How is she?"

Moc shook his head. The doctor pushed past us and went straight upstairs. I made to follow him, but Moc took my arm and led me into the kitchen. Father was sitting by the fire. He was bent forward, opening and closing his hands as if to catch and hold all the warmth he could. When he turned and saw me, his lips quivered. From upstairs I heard the sound of a low moan. The old man lifted his finger warningly to me as I started towards the foot of the stairs.

"Stay here." He motioned me to sit down. "If they want you, they will call."

"Mrs. Peele . . ." The doctor was raising his voice. "Can you hear me? It's me . . . the doctor."

I buried my head in my hands. Grett, my lovely Grett, was up there and here were we, myself, father and Moc unable to do a thing to help her. And then, suddenly, I thought of Sabel. I looked up at father.

"Sabel . . ." I began.

He pursed his lips, shook his head, and threw out his hand without saying a word.

So Sabel had not come back yet! Yet, even so, I could not find any anger or bitterness inside me for her. Nothing mattered now but Grett.

I rose to my feet unable to stay there any longer. The very minutes were precious now. Without a word, to father or Moc I went out of the kitchen and upstairs to Grett's room.

The doctor looked up as I came in and at once motioned me to the bedside. In answer to my look, he shook his head and started to put away his things.

I knelt at the bedside and struggled hard to control myself lest the bed should shake with my sobbing. Grett was now lying on her back, her head low on the pillow. The white counterpane rose and fell with an almost imperceptible movement. I started to count between each respiration. At times I feared she was gone, so slow and irregular was her breathing. Once I counted up to twenty before her next breath came.

Behind me, I could hear doctor saying how he must stay the night. Then mother took him downstairs.

I again buried my face in the counterpane. But it was no use praying any more. My lovely Grett Rhos Dirion was going from us without a word or a smile. I repeated her name over and over to myself. A fragment from an old englyn came into my head: "A chwilio heb ei chael hi . . ." That was it. I was lost in a great forest, calling on her name, searching here and there and never finding her.

"Sabel!"

I heard mother's cry as Sabel's feet raced up the stairs. As I turned from the bed I saw her framed in the doorway. She stood for a moment as though graven in terror. The next instant she was on her knees on the other side of the bed, her arms about Grett's shoulders. I looked enquiringly at the doctor who had followed her up;

father, mother, and Moc behind him. He gave a helpless shrug and lifted his eyebrows as though to signify that whatever we did would not harm or disturb Grett one way or the other.

Sabel held to Grett with all her might. And then, sobbing wildly, she called on her again and again.

Then, as Sabel called her, Grett opened her eyes. She gazed uncomprehendingly at Sabel for a moment, and then at us. The next moment a spasm of pain twisted her face. The doctor bent over her, holding her wrist between his fingers.

"Sabel . . . ? Where have you . . . been? Not with——"

Sabel nodded, her eyes wild with suffering. Grett nodded quietly as if confirming to herself something she had suspected all along. Then, as if it was too great a weariness now to worry any more about Sabel and Jasper, she turned and looked at me. Her lips parted and it seemed to me in that moment that the years slipped away from her and she was Grett Ellis once more.

"Are you in pain?" I asked her.

She gave a little nod and put her hand to her side. The old pucker of alarm gathered for a second above her jet eyebrows, that Ellis frown of hers which her mother and Jeff, too, had had in their day.

"Never mind . . ." I tried to speak lightly. "You'll be all right now. See, the doctor's here."

She shook her head. Then, putting out her hand, she took mine and placed it on her heart.

In the silence that followed, I lifted my finger to Sabel to keep quiet. I counted the intervals. Then, slowly, came another beat.

The silence in the room was thick and heavy. From outside came the soft lisp of the sycamores as they moved with what breeze there was. Far away across the Lyswen, down towards Rhos Dirion, a dog barked. . . . I watched

Grett anxiously. Then, as her eyelids fluttered, so did the fingers that pressed my hand to her breast relax. I did not even count any longer, but knelt there looking at her. Grett, Grett Ellis, Grett Rhos Diron . . . She was still and quiet now, and I knew that the next heart beat would never come. Behind me I heard mother's agonized: "Oh, doctor, she hasn't gone, has she?" Then the bed shook with Sabel's sobbing, and behind me I heard father's indrawn cry and Moc's quivering breath. But I could only look at Grett's face. Not even the sobbing in the room or Moc's hand on my shoulder could come between me and Grett. Her breast was still warm under my hand; but now, at last, it was unresponsive to me.

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Despite my innate fear of the dead, I spent the last night of all by her coffin. Sabel had filled the room with late roses, chrysanthemums, and all the wild flowers she could find. There were flowers everywhere, and she had arranged them in such a way that they hid the varnished wood and the gleaming brass. And there in the midst of them lay my lovely Grett. Now that she was lying there, removed from me so utterly and irrevocably, I bemoaned the golden hours that had passed us by, unwittingly as far as I had been concerned, because with Grett at my side I had wanted for nothing. But they were gone now with her, and the least of them given once more would open the very gates of Heaven for me. Nevertheless, it was something to be sitting there at her side. Now, so I reasoned with myself, she knew every thought of mine, would hear every poem or englyn that I would address to her, even though it remained in my mind as an unspoken thought.

When the time for the funeral drew near, the yard outside already black with people, I went up to see Grett for the last time. The flowers had now been taken from the coffin. Elias had put his best work into it, and terrible had been the sound of his hammer as Sabel and I drove by on our way to Llandover to get our mourning.

And now I leaned over the varnished oak to take my last farewell of Grett. For a moment I was impelled to turn back her closed eyelids so that I should once more and for the last time see the dark lustre and softness of her glance. But as my finger-tips touched her, I withdrew my hand hurriedly, fearful of disturbing her. Then, as Elias came into the room, I parted company with her. He was in his double-slitted coat and black trousers, and there protruding from his side pocket was the spatulate end of his screwdriver. He looked at me without saying a word, and then at the coffin. I understood at once. So, stooping, I kissed Grett's forehead, and then made way for Elias.

The singing in the house and on the yard outside made me feel like calling on them to stop. Oh, you basses and tenors, you altos and sopranos on that day, did you have to add to what was already too much to bear? And strange indeed on that day with the Vans robed in purple, and the trees and hedges touched with gold must have been the sight of our lane—black as it was with people all the way from Trewern to the turn of the Allt. First after the coffin went Sabel and I, then father and mother, and then Moc and our relations. All I could hear was the tramp and shuffle of feet before and behind, with Elias calling "Change!" as the bearers fell out and stepped forward to shoulder Grett's coffin. Then, as we came within sight of the Llyswen, I saw how the handrails of the bridge had been garlanded with flowers. I gripped

Sabel's arm to show her I understood. She looked pale and drawn under her dark hat, and times I felt the whole weight of her on my arm.

When we came to the bridge, however, the funeral stopped, and Elias came rushing back to where we waited with the news that we would have to ford the river. One of the trestles under the bridge had already given way. I looked as he directed and saw that the slender structure was swaying with the flow of the river. Then, before any of us could say a word, there was Moc pushing his way past us. I can see him now as he stepped into the water and got his shoulders under the bridge. It was that, I think, that broke my heart. I turned impulsively to share my emotion with Grett. But Grett was not at my side. It was then, at that moment, that I realized to the full what it was that had lain behind the anguish of the last four days. Grett was dead; and this was her funeral which we were following. . . . The bridge gave ever so slightly as the four bearers and their burden crossed over it.

BOOK THREE

Chapter 19

As Moc and I rode away from the house, the dawn was a mere stain behind the Vans. It wouldn't be light for an hour or more, and by that time we would be past the twin forests of Blaen Ddol and picking our way down to Pontyrhydfer. Then, as we came to the bend of the lane, I turned to look back at the old place. Father and mother were still at the door, the light from the passage streaming out past them. There, too, was Sabel. I waved back at them, and with that the hedge-bank came between us and all that mattered now was the journey that lay ahead of us.

Moc and I rode on quietly without a word. There was no point in hurrying. We did not even know how far we would have to travel before we would find him. It was no good thinking in days or miles. From Brecon on it would be new country for us. I could already feel dark valleys closing in on us, with wild peaks rising all around and making us think the horizon was only an hour's ride away.

We each carried a change of shirts and stockings, and as soon as we got to Brecon I would draw enough out of the Bank to see us through the next few weeks. It was a good thing that the corn harvest was over. The old people and Sabel could carry on easily on their own, even if we were not back before the end of November when the cattle would have to be in. Besides, Dico and the others were always within call and would be along to give them

a hand if anything out of the ordinary cropped up. My only fear was that Sabel might find the waiting too long. . . .

As we turned down into the Allt the oaks on each side of the road pressed close in on us and silenced even my thoughts. All I could see was the dark shape of Moc as he rode a length in front of me. Now and again a stone rang sharp and clear as a hoof jarred against it. From the valley below us came the cold speech of the Lyswen. And here we were setting out on this journey and not knowing where the end of it lay or in what manner we should at last return. Where, I wondered to myself, would Moc and I go from Brecon. Would the Fair have moved away down to the mining valleys—to Merthyr, Pontypridd, or the Rhondda? Or would it have gone north, taking the road to Builth, Rhayader, Llanidloes, and then over the Plinlimon to Machynlleth? Rhayader . . . Plinlimon, Corris! . . . What names they were! The old man and I had pored over the map with a magnifying glass the night before, he insisting that it was to the north we would have to travel, while Moc reminded us that there was always a fair at Merthyr and Pontypridd round about Christmas. But first we would have to go to Brecon. We would be sure to hear something there. Sabel had told us that if we asked at The Coracle we should surely have some news there. So it was to Brecon we had to make for first. From then on it would be putting up each night in a different inn, sharing a bed with Moc, and then on the road again as soon as it would be light; and hoping all the time that the horizon in front of us would mark the end of our quest. How many times before we found him would we have to ask if anyone had news of Jasper?

I was glad that Moc was quiet. It was as it should be. There was little in the early hours of an October morning that made for conversation. Besides, we had talked

enough. All that mattered now was that Jasper had to be found and brought home.

As we came to the Lyswen I could not help the glance I gave to my right. The year that had passed had toned down the crude trestle we had fixed under the footbridge after Grett's funeral. Only a year since she had gone! I wondered to myself what she would be saying if only she could now see Moc and me setting out on this search for Jasper. I shook my head and drew up alongside Moc as we went past Nanteos. It was no good going back in time. From now on my concern must be more for the living than for the dead.

Soon, we were through the village and rising to Tavyrn-y-Gwynt. The outline of the mountains grew sharper and darker as the sky lightened behind them. Then, as I had thought would happen, it began to get light after we had splashed through the Usk. And there's strange it was that once we were through the river and in Breconshire, I felt the very air was different and that the ring of the hoofs had changed their sound. To our right the sun came up good and strong behind the Vans, and ahead of us we could see the hills rising benign and far off in the morning haze. On our left the two forests of Blaen Ddol seemed to be moving with us, and there between us and Trecastle was a fringe of trees that showed black against the cruddled clouds. All around us was the rolling spaciousness of dawn.

As we clattered past Pontyrhydfer viarage where mother had been in service when she was a girl, Moc turned and gave me a wink. What he meant by it, I had no idea. Perhaps it was the thought he had that we might pull up for a drink at Trecastle; or, again, it might have been that like me something was quickening inside him because we were once more on the move. A warmth filled me as I looked at him. Now that we had left the parish behind us

he was the one link I had with the old place. His cap was well down over his eyes, and though the old man's cast-off coat was too long in the sleeve and tail for him, it creased tightly under his armpits and strained at the horn buttons down the front. The sight of him put backbone into me. It was good to have him with me. I felt in my heart that come what would, our journey would not be in vain or a waste of time. With Moc Mihartach at my side it was like having Justin with me. I remembered too how Sabel had looked when the old man had said that Moc was to come with me.

The Vans fell behind us and no longer did Blaen Ddol ride with us. Then, as we swung out from the side road to the turnpike, I breathed a prayer and crossed myself.

The parish was now far behind us, and Trewern, the old people, and Sabel were part of another life. All that mattered now was Jasper, and until we found him there could be no turning back.

.

But to go back to the beginning . . .

When I look back now on the winter that followed Grett's death I see it like some dark, lonely valley, and the only light in it is the lamplit glory of the old church. Day followed day in slow and heavy succession, and for a time the only psalm I could read was the cold thirty-ninth where it says how man is but a vain shadow and is become dumb because of the heaviness of God's hand. But with the love that was deep in me for Grett and all she had meant and did mean to me, this mood did not last. As the days went by, I began to realize that I was nearer to her than I had ever been before. There was not a field or path that did not hold some memory of her. For once I lost my fear and terror of the dark, for wherever I walked I

held communion with her. But as for seeing or receiving some ghostly manifestation of her, there was nothing of that. Even if such a thing might have been possible, Grett would not have made her presence known to me. She knew me too well for that old Grett, and would never have given me cause for terror. So it was that wherever I went, she walked with me. I was her love again, and the Grett that came with me shed the years that had lain on her and was as I remembered her in that heyday of our lives. There were nights when, as soon as milking was done and the cattle seen to, I would cut down through the Allt as though she were waiting for me at Rhos Dirion. No one lived there now, and I was free to come and go without the fear that anyone would think me out of my mind; not even if I called out her name or hooted like an owl to let her know I was there. A good thing it was, too, that the days passed in this way. Never was there such a dank, still November. I felt the weight of each cloud as it stole over or sagged on the weeping hills. And when night came on the air was raw and cold. Not a branch or twig stirred in the Allt, and yet the drip-drip of moisture went on without pause, as if Time itself were telling its seconds in icy drops.

At home here when the others had gone to bed, I sat up for hours each night with my old volumes of Dafydd ab Gwilym and Trebor Mai. There was hardly a page in all that wild impassioned verse which did not refer somehow or other to Grett's beauty. She was both Morfydd and Dyddgu to me; and where Dafydd had kissed lips that were so red or had unbraided hair that was so dark, it was to me as though Grett was in my arms again. There was something else, too, for grief must have an outlet somewhere. Poetry came back to me. As I pleaded and ditched, so a line would flash into my mind. Never had such verse poured from me. And though, as I say, I

communed with Grett, the pity of it was that on reading it to her I was denied the answering light in her eyes and the touch of her hand on mine as a phrase more tender than the rest would catch in my throat.

Even so, though I found some trace of her wherever I walked, it was the church that was our resting place. My walk there each Sabbath night was a pilgrimage I made to be nearer to her. As the short afternoon darkened, and mother and Sabel started to prepare tea, so I would start getting ready. I shaved and polished with all the care and pride that had been mine when I was courting. Then, at about a quarter to six so that I could have time to ponder on my step, I would set off before the old people. More than once I was tempted to sit in my old pew behind the altos, but that would have given rise to comment and brought my sentiment to ridicule. Vicar no doubt knew how I was living back in the past, for on the first Sunday after Grett's death he brought back Poole's chant into the service. Then, after the service, I would slip out before the old people and make my way home alone. I had not been near Grett's grave since the day of the funeral. It was inconceivable that I should find her there, sacred though the earthy weal still was.

So, thus, the weeks and months went by and it was not until on in the new year that the old man brought me to heel. A Sunday in early January it was, and I was about to start off for church, stick in hand and a flashlamp in my pocket in case I might miss the footbridge over the Lyswen. It was then that I noticed the old man was ready to come with me. I looked at him in surprise. All through the winter, mother and he had driven by trap to church and here he was in his square-crowned bowler and great coat. Mother looked up at us and nodded quietly.

"You are in good time," she said. "Three-quarters of an hour, you will do it easy."

I saw how she looked again at father and nodded, as though to urge him on or give him heart.

He preceded me out into the yard and didn't say a word until we were well away from the house. He was blowing a little, and when at last he paused, he rested heavily on the handle of his stick.

"Suppose you are wondering why it is I'm coming with you, eh?"

It was quite true. I had thought of nothing else since we had left the house. Grett for once was far from me.

"Well," he started to walk on slowly, "it's you, Ned . . . We are getting worried about you."

"Why? What's wrong?" I asked, though I knew quite well what was in his mind.

"Just what I said: *you*. You are not acting normal. . . . Time you pulled yourself together. . . ."

"How do you expect me to be? Think I ought to be making up to someone already?"

I could feel the cold look he gave me, and felt ashamed of my words.

"All right, Ned. No need to talk like that . . . I know how you feel. But you have got to pull yourself together. You are doing nothing but moping. No, no; don't start arguing yet . . . Though to say the truth, I'd like to see you show a bit of fire."

"You don't understand——" I began.

"Who doesn't? Me?" He again stopped and struck the road with the iron tip of his stick, "Don't you say that. It isn't only you and your mother that do feel, even if I don't show it. . . . I felt the same as you all did after Justin. Aye, you can look! You thought it didn't mean much to me because him and me were always at each other's throats . . . That's where you and your mother were wrong. Justin an' me was the same breed. . . . He was the only one who ever stood up to me. . . ." He

stopped as though out of breath. I understood better than ever now why it was he had had to kill Alltwen's bull with his own hand.

"So don't say I don't understand," he went on. "And you have got to pull yourself together. This is something everybody's got to face up to, sooner or later. Diain, I'd lost my father and mother before you were born . . . then Justin went. But I had you and your mother to think of, and the work, too . . . Besides, you are not the only one. You've lost a wife, all right. And the pick of the bunch she was . . ." He swallowed hard. "But don't forget, and don't be so self-centred . . . It is time you gave Sabel a thought. Do you think it is easier for her than it is for you? *Your* conscience is clear, anyway, just remember that."

I heard no more of what he said, and as we walked through the pitch darkness I kept my eyes on the ground as if afraid in my heart I might see or sense Grett's eyes.

Sabel! My heart cried out inside me, and had I been alone I would have returned home there and then. But the old man was there at my side, heavy, solid, indomitable; still the same despite his age as he had been when I was a boy, when I went this same way with my hand in his. And as he to me now, as Justin was and would have been, as Grett would have me be, so must I be now to Sabel.

From that day on Sabel became my main concern. We hoped that with the spring she would pick up in health. But her cheeks took no colour from the sun, though she was out in the fields all day. There were afternoons when we would lose her completely. Then Moc or I would search cautiously for her, not daring to show ourselves lest she should feel we were worried about her and spying on her movements. More often than not when I would come

upon her down by the Lyswen, or near the dingle in Maesyrrarian woods, she would take my arm and falter some excuse for having forgotten how late it was. Once, when I found her as far away as Graig Ddu, she broke down and cried as I held her to me. I can see her now as she sat on the bend of the sheep-path that jutted out half-way down the rock. At first, I had thought her a briar or wild cherry in flower. Then as I got nearer, I saw it was Sabel. For a full minute I stood watching her. I dared not shout or make my presence known to her. A sudden start and she would be headlong into the river below. I remembered Katherine Jeffries who had been found there when I was a boy. It was one of the reasons why I always took Graig Ddu at a gallop.

At last, Sabel got up and came slowly up the path. I hurried away from the edge of the rock and waited for her by the stile leading into the road. When she came up to me, she didn't say a word or show any surprise. Words for once were unimportant, and as I took her in my arms I let her cry herself out. There would be plenty of time for talk afterwards.

We didn't say much until we came to the Lyswen bridge, and by that time the Evening Star had pulled away from the crest of the Allt. Over Maesyrrhaf the moonglow brightened behind the hill and I marvelled that a solitary tree could be so sharply filligreed against it though it was a mile or two away from us. Then, as I watched it, there was the rim of the May moon. You could almost feel the movement of the earth as it turned towards it. And with the moon now clear of the hill, the noise of the river took on a softer note, and everything around us became still and tranced.

It was then that she started to tell me about herself, about Jasper, and the decision she had made after her mother's death

She said how when she and Jasper were together above the Doldre bridge on that night of Grett's death, they had heard someone riding through the Dyfnant valley. "I felt then," said Sabel, "that something was wrong . . . All the time I was with him that night, I kept hearing the sound of those hoofs, afraid they would come again. I even thought it might be you or Moc looking for me . . . Then, when I came back to the house . . . the lights on everywhere, I . . ." She failed to continue. Not that there was any need for her to; she was so much a part of Grett and myself that I knew exactly what the following hour had meant to her . . . "And that . . . that was the last time I saw him."

"How was he?" For the life of me I could not withhold the question. I had given him no thought for months. Indeed, anyone less real than he I could not imagine. That was the whole trouble. It was not Jasper himself I had ever seen, but, rather, the resemblance he had borne to Justin. Perhaps, of us all, it was only Sabel who had seen him for what he really was.

She did not answer my question, but I saw how her eyes widened as if she were seeing him clearly in her mind.

"Where is he now?" I asked.

She shook her head and I saw how her eyes now turned to the direction of Brecon where Myddfai mountain rose vast and dark against the moon.

"I . . . I don't know. After mam's . . . death, I wrote to him that we could never see each other again, never. That . . . was my last letter to him."

"Don't you love him any more then?"

"Love him?" As she said the words, her breasts lifting as she repeated my question, the thought came to me that Jasper must surely have heard them, wherever he might be. "Love him . . .!" She clung to me again. "I . . . I can't go on living without him. . . ."

"Then why——?"

She broke away from me with a flash of her old spirit.

"You know as well as I do, and so do the others, even Moc. It was because of me being out with him that night that the accident happened. . . . It was me should have been on top of the rick. . . . You all used to say that it was Justin and Jeff Ellis who stood between Jasper and me; but now it's my mother."

"You mustn't think of it like that," I said; and I tried to explain to her that things had had to happen as they did. I remembered only just in time not to mention the Almighty. "Your mother . . ."

But nothing I said could comfort her or make her feel that she was not responsible for all that had happened.

When we came to the waun, I lifted her over the quag where there was always the smell of moss and wild mint. The very lightness of her body told how the months had put on her.

The old people, Moc, and I talked on into the small hours that night about what we might do to help her. Mother and I thought a few weeks at the wells, Llanwrtyd or Llandrindod might help her, but the old man would have none of it. He was all for brewing her a jorum of mistletoe tea. "Best thing for the nerves there is," he argued. "Moc and me'll get some off the apple trees tomorrow. Berries don't matter. It's the leaves and the sap have the goodness, well-boiled, and taken night and morning. The Wells indeed! What do you think she's ailing with? Rheumatics?"

But the mistletoe tea or brew did not help, though she took it without a word as the old man prescribed. The doctor came, and on each Mart day I called at his surgery for the pills and the medicine. So it went on. As if by common consent not one of us ever dared mention or hint that her only hope of recovery lay in Jasper's return.

Then, like a rumble of far-off thunder, came the late July and August of that year. As Sir Edward Grey said, one by one the lights were going out all over Europe; and in the darkness that followed we lost sight for a while of the troubles that had weighed so heavily on us. Evening after evening a number of us—myself, Lewsin, Ek's carpenter, Dico, and the rest of them—would troop down towards Llangadock to meet the paper-boy on his bicycle. Lewsin would have it that the Germans would never come past Liège. But Liège fell, and Namur fell, and then Antwerp. . . . Then came Mons, and we found it hard to believe that the pick of our army had had to fall back before the enemy. Each night I looked towards the east and saw the old Vans rising like a great rampart between us and the grey hordes that were sweeping over Europe. Of course, it could not go on like that. The French and the British would soon make a stand, and with the Russian steamroller crushing imponderably on it could only be a matter of months before Germany would be caught between the forces that were risen defensively against her. Nevertheless, the war gained in momentum and the shadow of mighty events came as a cloud over the golden September. . . . Little wonder it was that for a while we forgot our own troubles at home here. The thunder of war trembled afar off, and times, so I would think, a trumpet would sound in the wind as though an army were charging by. Then, as our Thanksgiving drew near, I could not help thinking how difficult it would be this year for vicar to give his customary sermon while that too rich and costly a harvest was being reaped on fields vaster and more richly fed than our own. Still, I need not have worried, for when that night came, Trewern for once was not represented in the old church. Instead, we were all of us grouped around Sabel's bed. The noise of war receded far from our minds that night, and all I could hear as I

looked down on her was the crunch of the old wheel as it took us still further and deeper into the valley destined for us. So it was that the old man decided that we must set out and look for Jasper before it was too late.

Before going to bed, I made my peace with Grett, and as I looked towards the church I imagined her giving me her blessing and God speed. When, at last, I fell asleep, it was as though I was already in the saddle.

Chapter 20

WE did not catch up with Jasper for three weeks, and if you were to ask where it was in all that we searched for him, I would be hard put to tell you. When you are in a strange country one valley is like another, and the changing horizon is something which may or may not mark the end of your journey. All we got from The Coracle at Brecon was that Jasper had travelled north with the fair into mid-Wales, just as father had guessed it would ; but whether Jasper was still attached to it no one could say. Rhayader . . . Llanidloes . . . over the Plinlimon to Machynlleth, up through Corris and along under the shadow of Cader Idris. . . . So we journeyed, picking our way through narrow wooded valleys, sleeping in one inn after the other, and once going off the road and riding all through the night because we had heard that wood-felling was going on in a forest past Dinas Mawddwy.

By this time I was one with Doll, and the flaps of the saddle were as smooth as the palm of my hand, the bridle-rein soft and supple from the warmth and sweat of so much riding. At first it was strange to be following a road that was new to us and not knowing what each turn in it would show. At home in the old parish I knew the turns and dips of every lane, and as the stars changed their positions with the seasons I knew just where to find them. But everything was different now. Times we thought we were heading dead north only to find that the Plough was pointing in a different direction. In places the roads were

narrow and many were the times when branches would whip into our faces. It made me think at times of passages in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and my consolation was that, as was the case with Christian and Valiant-for-Truth, the end of our journey would bring us our reward. Not that we did not despair, mind. Night after night, in different tap-rooms we went through the same old rigmale.

"Has the Fair passed this way?"

"Aye . . ."

"How long ago?"

"Same date us usual, never varies."

Then we would ask after Jasper.

"Jasper Peele you say?"

"Or Powell . . . He goes by either."

A look at us and then at the secretive, listening toppers.

"Any of you boys heard of that name?"

It was the same wherever we called. The Fair had gone on its way and was of no more account. All the talk now was the war and the way the Army was buying up horses wherever they could be found. Old screws fit only for the knacker's yard were fetching stud prices. There was talk, too, that the government was out for all the timber they could buy. It would not be long before Wales would be mother-naked without a tree. Wood-fellers were earning double what they used to. Prices were rising everywhere, and there was no doubt about it that farming at last would come into its own. But of Jasper we heard nothing. Our only hope was that the Fair would soon be on its way south again. That was where the money was, in the mining valleys. The colliers were working double shifts and the talk was that new factories were going up everywhere. There were rumours also of conscription, and as we rode into town or village I got tired of seeing Kitchener's eyes and moustache, his finger pointing straight from the poster and reminding everybody that his country needed him.

And then, suddenly, just when we thought it was no use going farther into the mountains, we had news of Jasper. The saddle-soreness no longer mattered, and in my mind I was already penning the letter that would tell Sabel and the old people that we were at last on our way home.

The sight of the inn with the light from the bar shining out on the road was like a glimpse of home. Never mind what the chapel folk say, a friendly inn is the traveller's bourne, and the Good Samaritan knew as well as any that its door is never really closed, be the licencing laws whatever they are.

We came upon it suddenly, when we least expected it. The darkness around us was pitch black, and the road down to the valley so steep that I had to lean back in the saddle to keep my balance. Down below us we could hear the heavy, dull roar of a river. I had never in all my life been on such a steep pitch. The road under Graig Ddu at home was nothing to it.

"Ned! Heisht!"

"What is it?" A shiver went over me as I thought he had seen something.

"Singing," said Moc. "Listen!"

I held my breath. Moc was right. By listening carefully and disregarding the noise of the river, I could hear men singing.

"Come on!" shouted Moc. "It's that place they told us about, The Half Way."

As we rounded the bend of the lane, I saw the orange glow streaming out from the small windows. We walked the horses up to the white-washed walls. There was a real randyboo going on in the bar. Through the open door came the smell of broth.

"You go in," said Moc. "I'll see to the horses."

I clonked in through the stone-flagged passage, my legs

stiff and dead as if they did not belong to me. As I walked into the bar the singing stopped.

"Are you the landlord?"

"Aye, happen I be." He was lean, long moustached and raw-boned, bigger in build than the run of folk in our parts.

"Can you put two of us up for the night?"

He nodded.

"Double bed I got . . . You an' the wife?"

"No, my mate. . . . We've got our horses here."

"Right. Stables are round the back. You'll be wanting a bite?"

"Yes, something warm if you've got it."

"Lil!" He called over his shoulder. "Two fellers for the night. The broth ready?"

His wife appeared, wiping her hands on her apron. Her cheeks were like apples.

"I'll get the blankets aired now." Her face dimpled as she smiled across at me. "Supper will be in the kitchen. Ready when you are, sir."

The buzz and murmur of conversation resumed as I went out to Moc.

"It's all right," I said. "The horses all right?"

"In two ticks. Wonder if I could get some warm mash for them! Done nigh on forty we have today. Your father'd have a fit if he knew!"

I went with him to the stables. The sound of the river boomed like a pipe organ.

After our meal in the kitchen—the basinfuls of broth starred with gold rings and, tasty with leeks and little sav'ry—Moc and I went into the bar. The place was well-filled now, the benches around the walls packed with farmers and labourers. At the far end a group of soldiers sat at a table with their backs to us. Pipe and cigarette

smoke hovered in a warm cloud over the bar. What with the touch of frost in the air the fire spurted blue and yellow as stone coal will when it is well alight and the limed small has caught and hardened. Then, for a few minutes I lay back in my chair with my legs stretched out in front of me. It was all so much like the old days when I had gone out with Justin to the Tavern or the Pandy . . . How were things at home now? It was now nine o'clock, and the cows and the horses would be bedded down, everything finished for the night and the lamp moved to the edge of the table as the old man sat reading the *Weekly Mail* . . . I could see Sabel, too; and as the bright glimpse of her flashed vividly in my mind, I thought again of Jasper. Tomorrow again, the dark roads and endless valleys awaited us. Nothing but fir-clad hills with the sun going down in the afternoon and the mountains becoming sharp-edged and mysterious against the west. The same old questions wherever we went, putting up again in some different inn, new faces, the talk of the war, and the feeling growing inside me that yet deeper and darker valleys still stretched out before us. . . .

After a while I got up and went outside. After three weeks of it, my bile was souring with pot-house talk.

A strange and bewildering sight met my eyes. The moon in its first quarter rode the fir-pointed mountain crest that rose beyond the river. Mountain after mountain rose up against the sky and the smell of hoar-frost from the river gave edge to the night air. It tingled in my nostrils. I breathed deeply and felt it penetrate thin and sharp into every cranny of my lungs. And then I began to pick out my old friends. The Plough dipped low against the horizon and as I followed the line of it I saw the direction of our route. Somewhere up there in the wild heart of Wales was the end of our journey. . . . I saw again the road as it went on and on, thrusting through shuttered

villages, being swallowed in silent forests, skirting ravines, stealing past graveyards . . . Then a step behind me brought me back to myself. I turned sharply and saw Moc, his eyes bright and alive with excitement.

"What do you think?" His fingers dug into my arm. "They've seen him."

"Where?"

The blood roared behind my ears, and already in my mind I could see the three of us riding up through the Allt.

"Come inside!"

Moc led the way into the bar and pushed through the crowd, turning his head to wink me on as I followed close behind him.

"Here he is." He pulled up short in front of a thick-set young fellow who stood talking with the soldiers. "Tell my buttie here what you told me."

I looked the young fellow up and down. He was mountain stock all right, the sort who would have linked up with Justin and Moc on any spree. His black hair waved across his forehead, his eyes brimful with humour.

"Right." He grinned at me. "Jasper Peele you are looking for, isn't it? Aye, I seen him right enough. With the fair he is at Cadlan, over the mountain there." He jerked his head towards the river and the mountain rising beyond it. "I was there the night afore last. In the booth he is, taking on all comers."

I groped in my inside pocket and took out a little snap I had of Justin. Then, shading the moustache and beard, I showed it him.

"Near enough like him," he said. "Not quite so square perhaps. Jasper Peele, that's him, no mistake."

"Let's have a look, Daff." One of the soldiers took the snap from the farmer. He was a little unsteady on his legs, his peaked cap pushed back from his brick-red forehead. He turned his back to the light and squinted at the snap.

"Jasper\ bloody Peele is it?" He looked up at Moc.
"You know the bastard?"

Moc's face mottled, and he put down his glass.

"Better watch your tongue, soldier."

"Go easy, boys!" The landlord leaned over the counter.
"You, soldier, none of that talk here. The missus 's about.
Have respect."

The soldier swayed on his feet.

"No offence, no offence." He thrust his hand out to Moc. "Shake, pal." Then, as Moc took his hand, he leaned forward and dropped his voice. "But it's a bastard he is, never mind how you take it."

The young farmer winked across at me to keep the peace.

"Why do you say that?" he asked the soldier. "Was you there the other night?"

"Too true I was."

"Well?"

"You can ask . . . But you don't know the game like I do. The way he played with that young chap from our mob! Three bloody rounds when he could have laid him out in the first minute. Just playing with him he was . . . Cat an' mouse! Hell! Slow murder it was! A few of us wanted to break the ring." He turned to Moc, his eyes resting on Moc's broken nose and sloping shoulders. "What do you say, mate? You look like you know summat about it?"

"Something in what you say," agreed Moc. I saw at once that he wanted no brawl tonight. No doubt he was conserving all he had until we caught up with Jasper.

"Right then," went on the soldier. "But what does this ba——, this Peele chap do? Drags it out three rounds just to give the crowd their money's worth. Flaming pity one of our chaps wasn't there! We got just the boyo in our mob—Jim Picton, from the Rhondda he is, Treorchy. Lucky for Mr. Bloody Peelè that he's on leave now."

"Look," I said. "How far's this place? Could we get there tonight?"

"Tonight!" The soldier laughed. "Damme, it's over sixty by road."

"Then there's another way, is there?"

"Aye, but not in the dark," put in the young farmer. He again jerked his head to indicate the mountain. "Straight over the top it is. It's a goat you'd need, not a nag."

Moc was already buttoning his coat. He nodded as I caught his eye.

"Don't be daft!" The landlord leaned over the counter. "You'll never find your way. I 'ouldn't try myself, an' I was born here. Don't be daft, boys. Start with the sun, first thing. Besides, if you could get there tonight, what better'd you be? Think any pub'd open up to you afore it's light?"

We had to give in to reason. I imagined some fool coming to the old parish and trying to cross over the Van Rocks to Graig-y-Nos by dark.

"Moc?"

He turned over, breathing heavily. The blast of his breath was almost too much for me.

"What is it?"

"Think we'll have trouble with him?"

"What if we do? Makes no difference, do it? Diawl, we haven't come all this way to take 'No' for an answer."

"But——"

"No 'but' about it. Just leave that side of it to me. I'll look after Jasper. Just you think of Sabel, that's all."

I tried to think of Sabel, but she was too far removed from all that surrounded and lay ahead of us. How long, I wondered, would it be before the old Vans would rise again on our skyline.

"Worrying over everything," muttered Moc. A second later and the rhythm of his breathing changed. He shuddered once or twice and his breath seemed to catch in his throat. Then came a low whistle, followed by a steady purr. He was deep in sleep and would snore now until early morning. For once, however, I made no attempt to regulate my thoughts to the tempo of his snores, and minutes passed when I was not even conscious of the noise he made. I could only lie there staring at the small window and thinking of what lay ahead of us as soon as it would be light. So Jasper had broken from the traces at last! Now, perhaps, we should see him for what he really was.

Through the window I saw the steep mountain rising like a wall between us and the end of our journey.

Chapter 21

As far as we could see there was nothing but mountain. The light was now fading from the sky and the horizon was still unchanged. We had kept the distant peak before us all the afternoon. At first it had seemed only an hour's ride away. That is how it is with mountains. The sunlight plays tricks with them, and they with you. Times, as we picked our way towards the crest of a long rise, I felt the peak would be there within easy reach. But when we topped the rise, so another valley opened before us, the sheep-paths like leaf fibres zig-zagging down to the river or stream that flashed between the hills. And all the time the wind kept up its strum on the pale whin and grass.

It was a good thing that we had waited till it was light before starting. Even now, late as it was getting, we could see no sign of the end. We had not eaten since early breakfast and I was sorry now that we had not thought of bringing something in our pockets. Times I would talk to Doll, just to hear my own voice, for Moc and I had relapsed into silence as is the way when the quiet of a mountain comes down on one. The exhilaration of the morning had been replaced by a sense of mystery. I had the feeling at times that the purpling horizon marked the end of life itself. And the strange thing was that had it been so, I would have ridden steadily towards it. The mountain possessed me completely. I was at once as old as the rocks, and for minutes on end I watched the flight of a buzzard as it

circled this way and that, I was one with it, too, and felt the press of blue air against me as it hovered motionless for a second against the wind.

Then, at last, all colour drained from the hills, and the valleys on all sides were like dark veins in stone. The buzzard had long since made off in a straight line for the great rocks that rose beyond us.

"No bed for us tonight!" Moc grinned at me as he held the match to his pipe.

"It's early yet." I peered at my watch. "It's only . . . half past four."

"We're off the track, Ned. Wouldn't be surprised if we are going in a circle. Better if we'd gone round the road."

"With those rocks in front of us all day?" I pointed to them where they towered black against the sky. "That's our point. Once past them and we're there."

"Think so?" He groped in his pocket. "Here, have a hanch."

He handed me a chunk of cheese. It was as hard as stone and he must have had it on him for days. As I bit off a piece I spat out the shreds of tobacco that clung to it.

"Thanks." I handed the piece back to him. Typical of Moc it was to have a bit of cheese on him. He would have it always that there was more body to it than meat. It was always his breakfast at home, the old man the same. Unless they had cheese for breakfast they were hungry all day.

I chewed it until it almost took the skin from my palate. Nevertheless, it was satisfying and I felt the warmth of it spreading through my stomach.

By now it was quite dark, and so bright were the stars that I had to look this way and that before I could pick out the Plough. Then I set Doll's head in the right direction, her upright ears like the sights of a fowling piece.

The silence of the mountain was more profound and vast than anything I had ever known before.

"Uffern dân!"

I reined up hard at Moc's sudden oath. He was a length in front of me, and I wondered how it was that both he and the cob showed up so black against the sky.

"What's up?"

"Come here. Careful now!"

I kned Doll forward, peering over her head. She moved cautiously as though feeling her way.

"Whoa there! See that, Ned? Look!"

I followed the sweep of his hand. Right at our feet was a black void. It drew me like a magnet, making me pull back on the reins.

"Damme good job there's no mist," said Moc. "One step and there'd be no Jasper, Sabel, or us any more."

I could now make out the rocks rising beyond the chasm or whatever it was. There they stood, tantalizingly near. A well-aimed stone would rebound from them.

Moc swung his foot clear of the stirrup and dropped to the ground. I did the same. All I could hear now was the beat of my heart and the sudden jar of Moc's tips as he kicked at a tussock.

"Not a bloody stone!" he muttered. He kept on kicking and at last there came the ring of iron on stone.

"At last!" He straightened up and backed away from the edge of the rock.

"Keep your ears skinned now!" As he spoke he half-wheeled and threw the stone downwards. Quite unconsciously I started counting the seconds; and then I stopped. The stone had been swallowed as surely as if it had been dropped into the pit of Annwn. I felt myself shiver. I suddenly wanted to get away from the place.

"Moc! Don't be a fool. Come back!"

He laughed back at me over his shoulder.

"Safe enough," he said. "You see the cob don't bolt. I'm going to see what it's like. Don't want to be stuck here all night, do you?"

He disappeared over the edge of the rock. From time to time I heard his feet scrabbling on shale.

"You all right?" I shouted.

"All right," he shouted back. His voice seemed to come up from under my feet, "But it's no good, Ned. Stay where you are!"

He was blowing hard when he suddenly reared up in front of me.

"Like the rock of the old Van, Ned. We'll have to go round the head of it. Can't see the bottom of this."

I could say nothing. I prayed Doll would not move forward for I was clutching at the bit as though it were all between me and that black, silent emptiness a yard from me. Over and over a verse repeated itself in my mind: "The angel of the Lord tarrieth around them that fear and delivereth them . . ." The words strengthened me. Even so, every instinct in me was for turning back. Better by far the scorn of the old man and Sabel's hurt than this terror that lay before me at this moment. Here, so I said to myself—here was the wild, dark heart of Wales . . . I looked up and saw the procession of the stars, rank on rank, and wheeling with the universe in awful array.

"O-hoi!"

My heart almost stopped at the suddenness of Moc's shout. He had funnelled his hands to his lips and was shouting across the gulf. The echo of his shout was caught and thrown back from rock to rock, his last note thin and pure as silver as it lost itself in arcades of rock and stone.

"Come on, Ned. Together now!"

"O-hoi-i-i-i-i!"

"JASPER!"

The rocks gave back his name.

Then, turning the horses' heads to the right, we rode for the head of the valley. Beyond the black edge of the rocks on the other side, a faint glow lit the sky. At first I thought it was the moon-rise; but as we came to the head of the valley and turned back with the river, the moon rose in front of us. The grim rocks rose like a wall on each side of us. Even now as I looked up at them, they filled me with terror. A blessing it was that the November night was still and quiet. I imagined what it would be like with a south-wester blowing up from Cardigan Bay. . . .

Then, suddenly, as we rounded the bend of the valley, I saw the lights of the town and the fairground. There below us were the coloured lights and the flashing whirl of the roundabouts. I looked at Moc and grinned as I caught his wink. And like a note of welcome, there came to us on the up-wind the sudden, shrill whoop of the engine-hooter and with it the blare of music.

Chapter 22

WE put up at a white-washed inn just outside the town, and although I hoped that the three of us would be on the road before the night was out, I booked a room for Moc and myself so that the horses would be well looked after. What we would do for a horse for Jasper did not worry me. I still had a handful of sovereigns left, and gold I knew would talk louder than the paper money which had been in use since the war began. But if we failed to get a horse, then Moc would have to make his way home as best he could. At last, when we had both eaten and smartened ourselves up, we went down to the town.

It being the Saturday evening and the last night of the fair, the town seethed with people. There were soldiers everywhere just as if it were a garrison town like Brecon. The public-houses were spilling out on the pavements, and from the tail of my eye I saw how Moc ran the tip of his tongue over his lips as we passed them by. It was as much as I could do myself not to be caught up in the festivity that was in the air. Young farmers with rosettes in their buttonholes shouted and greeted one another as they came and went; girls arm-in-arm went in strings down the middle of the street; bicycle-bells rang, motor-cars hooted as they tried to push their way through, traps jingled and rattled as they drove in by the dozen from the surrounding districts, drunkards sang, children shrieked, the music of roundabout came and went, and for some reason which I could not make out, a church bell rang as if calling on

all and sundry to eat, drink, and be merry before the Sabbath came.

"Hello, farmer. Want a rosette?"

I stiffened from head to foot as one of the street hoydens slipped her arm through mine and smiled up at me. She was dark-eyed and full bloused. The town was full of her sort. Where they came from I had no idea; perhaps it was the soldiers that attracted them.

"All right, all right. Don't look so frightened!" She snapped a coloured streamer into my face and before I could stop her she flung her arm round my neck and gave me a quick kiss. Then, joining three or four others who stood watching us, she flounced off shaking her hips and filling the street with laughter.

My whole body tingled from her kiss. Quite unconsciously I straightened my shoulders and pulled my jacket into place, glancing into shop windows to catch my reflection. So I was not too old after all! Forty-two? Why, it was nothing. Moc at forty-eight was still full of life, and I smiled to myself as I thought what Justin would have done had he been in my place. The girl was nothing but a second Teg. And then, in a flash my mind came back to Jasper, and I was myself again. Nevertheless, I found myself searching the crowds for another glimpse of the girl. My lips still felt the warm, generous kiss she had given me. Then, as we turned away from the High Street down towards the river, there was the fairground. So here at last was the end of our journey! I closed my eyes for a second, fearful of what might be in store for us. But all I could see was Sam's face as Moc and I had ridden away that morning. My lips became at once hard and set, and a nervous pulse beat in my stomach as my step quickened to the rhythm of the strident music.

At first everything was a jumble and flurry of noise and colour. It was as if all there were out to forget the war

for one night and had given themselves up for one last fling. I could feel the excitement in the air. There was no doubt about it. The music, the movement, even the slight touch of frost in the air were as intoxicating as fermenting home-brew. On and on it went: the blare from the whirling roundabout, the pendulum arc of the swing-boats with their flurry of undergarments as girls screamed and kicked up their legs, the crack of rifles and reek of smoke from the shooting galleries, the heavy drone and occasional sudden blast from the tractor engines. There were types, too, that made you think you were in foreign parts; stall attendants of all race and colour; negroes, Indians, girls in red shawls and with gold ear-rings glittering under their black hair, half-naked barkers with tattooed arms and chests, and ever pouring in, shouting, laughing, singing, trying the Hoop-la, clanging the bells as they swung the heavy mallet, throwing at the coco-nuts as though it was the Kaiser himself who was impaled there, came the people of the town, soldiers, everybody from wherever they could, and Moc and myself. . . .

"What's that over there?"

Moc squinted to where I pointed. There, beyond the shooting galleries, was a man on a platform bawling through a tin megaphone. I tried to make out what it was he was shouting, but could hear nothing for the noise that filled the air. The reek of the naphtha flares and the stench from the engines almost sickened me. Someone threw a handful of confetti in our faces, and I dodged only just in time to miss a squirt from a water-pistol.

"Living Pictures!" Moc stopped and pointed scornfully at the illuminated signboard in front of the big tent. "'THE LOSS OF THE TITANIC.' Diawl, it's something 'found' we want, not pictures! A trick it is, all done with wires. Come on, Ned; Past the Helter Skelter over there!"

I followed close behind him.) On) or two started to expostulate as he shouldered through them. Then, as they sized him up, no one seemed inclined to carry the argument further. I grinned with pride as I looked at him. He had left his overcoat at the inn, and in his square-cut jacket and wide breeches he looked the typical mountain fighter that he was. It was easy to imagine what the impact of his small eyes and broken nose had on those who had turned to shout at him.

"Over there, Ned. See it?"

A weakness came over me as I saw the huge booth with its festooned red, white and blue lamps in front of us. Gaudy posters lined the entrance, and ranged alongside the barker on the wooden platform were boxers of different weights and sizes. But of Jasper I could see no sign. The crowd was already pouring in. Without saying a word, Moc and I fell in line behind them and got our money ready.

"This way! This way! Battling Dando at eight six . . . Dai Gomer at eleven four . . . Jas Peele at twelve twelve——"

"That's the sod we want," shouted a voice behind me.

I turned round and saw a crowd of soldiers pushing their way in behind us, and something inside me told me at once that the man who had shouted was the Jim Picton we had heard about the night before. Though he was in uniform, there was no mistaking him for what he was. He stood out from everybody around him, and was as heavy as Moc in the shoulders and as tall, if not taller, than I was. His small eyes held mine unblinkingly as I took in his battered face and the misshapen ears that grew close to his short-cropped hair.

"You can look, farmer," shouted one of his crowd. "Just you wait till you see him stripped. Clear the booth he will, won't you, Jim?"

"Reckon Jasper's going to have his hands full," muttered

Moc. "He'll have to pole-axe this yob before he'll lie down."

Before I could answer him I had paid my shilling and was carried forward by the crowd. And it was then that I saw Jasper. The poster picture of him in the narrow gangway was life size, and as I looked at it I felt as though it was Justin who stood there in front of me. "One thing was certain. It was not the Jasper any of us had known at home. The artist had somehow caught the old recklessness and devilry that had been part of Justin. Underneath the crude but real enough poster was the name, Jasper Peele, with his weight and record.

"Uffern!" At my side I heard Moc's astonished oath. "No need to worry about him, Ned." He turned back to Picton and his crowd: "'Fraid you'll be late on morning parade, gwas. Better hook it before Peele sees you. Just his stamp you are."

Picton's contemptuous spittle slapped right on Jasper's face.

Once inside the tent, I felt I was in another world. The din of the fair seemed far away and for a moment or two I could see nothing for the tobacco fumes that wreathed and curled like a blue-grey mist over the heads of the crowd. The only light there was fixed over the ring. Its white glare shone on the upturned faces and gleaming eyes.

"Ladies and gentlemen . . ." For all the tension that was on me, I smiled at the "ladies".

"Aye, don't forget us, mister." A group of girls was just behind us.

"Don't worry, you 'ont be forgotten!" The promoter or whoever he was lowered his megaphone and grinned over in our direction. His soiled white jersey gave him the look of a fighting tupp past his time. "The winner'll take you on after the show . . . One at a time, of course. So you

can start peeling off, girls. Just have patience, an' you'll all be satisfied."

roar of laughter followed his words and one of the girls made a show of unbuttoning her blouse.

"I looked everywhere for Jasper. No doubt that as the star attraction he was being kept back a while. Jim Picton, I could see, was already well up to the front, his soldier's cap well on the back of his head.

"*Ladies* and gentlemen. . . . Three first-class contests : . . . First, Battling Dando . . . Followed by Dai Gomer . . ."

As he announced their names, each boxer climbed into the ring, stripped and gloved, and stood grinning at the crowd. I held my breath for the next announcement:

"And now, at a hundred and eighty-five, ready to take on all comers, any weight, any size, any colour—Sledgehammer Jones of Ironbridge, Merthyr——"

A howl of protest went up as the heavyweight bent through the ropes.

"Where's Jas Peele?"

"Peele's on the poster!"

"Fraud! Break the ring, boys!"

"Jibbed it he have! We got Jim Picton here. Fetch Peele!"

"Order! Gentlemen . . . gentlemen, Peele's not turned up . . . But Sledge here 'll——"

The angry shouting drowned the din outside. Picton was already climbing into the ring.

"Come on, Ned! Moc turned to me, his face grim and his cap well down over one eye. "There's summat wrong here. We got to find out where he is."

I followed him as he thrust his way to the ring side.

"Where is he?"

Picton was shouting now, his voice booming through the booth.

"Fetch him out! He knew I was coming tonight. Fetch the sod out!"

"Listen, soldier. Let me explain." The showman was sweating freely and I saw how his eyes motioned the boxers ranged beside him to stand close. The heavyweight moved threateningly towards Picton.

"Keep out o' this, butty!" Picton stood his ground, and the boxer stepped back, shrugging his shoulders. "Now, mister," Picton turned again on the promoter: "Where's this bloody Peele? Or is it that it's you don't want to lose the purse?"

The promoter pulled out a handful of money. A gold piece or two flashed in the light bearing down from the arc-lamp.

"Here, take it!" he pleaded. "Take it an' get out!"

Picton laughed down at him.

"Keep yer money. All I want is Peele. Where is he?"

The other flung out his arms.

"Find him an' he's yours," he said. "We haven't seen him since last night. Hasn't showed up all day. Boosing, that's where he is . . . Like a madman he is, and women too . . . I am proud of my boys I am, an' they got to keep fit an' up to scratch . . . Even if he did show up now, he'd be in no way to fight. That's the truth, soldier. If you want him, you better start on the pubs . . . But look out for him . . . He don't give a damme for anybody these days. . . ."

"What's he saying, Jim?"

"Peele or our money back!"

Picton dived out through the ropes and pushed between Moc and me as if we weren't there.

"What's up, Jim? Where you going?"

"Going to find that bastard? Time he got a taste of what he handed out to Todd the other night."

The crowd gave way before him as he and his followers

piled out of the tent. Before I could gather my thoughts or say a word, Moc was already pushing his way to the exit. I caught up with him before the crowd closed in behind him.

"Moc!"

"Come on!" He didn't turn his head. "Keep close and keep that gang in sight, you'm taller than me. Jasper's going to need a second in his corner when that Picton finds him." He suddenly grinned over his shoulder at me. "If not a second, then a bloody substitute, myn diawl i!"

As we stepped out of the booth the air, acrid though it was with gunpowder, paraffin, and engine oil, hit me like a breath from over the Vans. Jumping on to the slowing platform of the roundabout, I saw that Picton and his crowd were already by the main gate leading out into the street.

"Can you see 'em, Ned?"

Moc was at my side, tip-toeing to follow my outstretched arm. We gained a few yards as the roundabout began to move. The wide-nostrilled horses rose and fell as the music started to grind out. As we jumped to the ground the curses of the attendant followed us. Then, shielding my face with my arm from streamers, confetti, and water-pistols, I half ran behind Moc. Elbows out and regardless of all who shouted and cursed as they gave way before him, he made straight for the street. And in spite of the heaviness and misgiving that was on me, the sight of his check cap was like a banner calling me on.

Chapter 23

HOWEVER large or small a town may be, you can be sure there are streets in it that make you look over your shoulder as you enter them lest someone you know should see you. So it was with me on this night when Moc and I followed close behind Jim Picton. It was good-bye to Grett and Sabel as we struck off from the High Street and called at one pub after the other. From then on it was nothing but crowded by-ways and ill-lit houses with people of all ages shouting, screaming, and singing as the music from the fairground set the pulses racing and desires mounting high. Choruses from the latest ragtimes came out into the street from every pub, girls openly enticed men to go with them, and what I saw in many a dark alley made me glad that Sabel, ill as she was, was safe at home at Trewern. It was evident, too, that money was flowing like water. Cash registers rang, coins tinkled on wet counters, paper money greasy and limp with sweat passed from one hand to another, so much so that I smiled to myself as I thought of the few sovereigns I had buttoned safely in the stomach pocket of my breeches. But in every pub where we followed Picton, the answer was the same. All he did was to put his head through the doorway and ask if Peele was there.

"Peele here?"

"Peele? Jas Peele the boxer? On the razzle he is, soldier. Painting the town. Try up the road."

Then on again through the crowded pavements, keeping

close to Moc and dreading the moment when Picton would rush further in to a bar.

"Peele here? Anybody here seen Peele?"

"Sure you don't want Kelly?"

"Peele, I said. Jas Peele."

"Left here an hour ago. Ask Charlie here. He's come round now. Tell the soldier, Charlie, what Peele did to you?"

To me it was nightmarish.

"Painting the town he is, soldier."

"Look out for him, gwas. Even the police are keeping clear of him."

On we would go again as if the town itself were one mad, whirling, raucous roundabout. Little wonder it was that evangelists were saying that the war was Armageddon.

"Just what I's always afraid of," muttered Moc as we saw Picton stride away from another pub.

"What do you mean?"

"Too good to be true he was at home there. I knew it was in him all the time. It's in the blood, Ned. Justin, your old man, your grandfather. Don't know where you come in—— Hallo! What's up there?"

I looked up the street and saw Picton with a group of young farmers and girls. We hurried up to them.

"Where's that?" Picton was asking.

"First on the left, soldier. The Cask, that's where he is. Stripped to the waist and clearing the bar. . . . Roaring drunk he is, got a red-head in tow, too. Laid her bloke out he did."

"Come on, boys! Now for it!" As I heard the reckless note of glory in Picton's voice something like a douche of cold water went over me. There was something else, too, and as the implication of what I had heard sank into my brain, I thought of Sabel. So he had forgotten her already! I looked at Moc and saw the change that had

come over him, too. It was a glimpse of him which I had not seen since the night when Justin had fought Da Probert. The years of good living with us at home seemed to have fallen away from him. He was now only muscle and bone. His eyes had gone small and hard and no longer did his broken teeth show as his lips tightened over them.

"Moc?"

"What is it?"

"What are we going to do? He'll be in no shape to reason with."

"No reasoning to be, Ned. He's coming back with us tonight."

"But——"

"Come on. He's got his plate full tonight. First Picton, an' then me. Depends which of us get him first."

As we entered the street I had the decency not to pray that we should come through this night without harm. The sight of it told me at once that this was as far as we would have to travel. All randy-boos ended here, and even if we had not heard that Jasper was already here, I would have known without any doubt that this was his last place of call.

No more than a gambo's breadth at its widest, the street was chock-a-block with people. Their noise half drowned the wind-borne din of the fairground. As we pushed through, keeping Picton well in sight, a half fell over a man lying in the gutter. He was bleeding from a cut on the head, but no one gave any heed to him. I looked over the crowd but could not see a policeman's helmet anywhere. In a ring in the middle of the road some trollops were showing their knees and garters as they danced to a song which the crowd around them were bawling and clapping.

"Look, boys, there's Picton!"

"Come on, Jim. See if you can get in The Cask."

"Don't worry. Jim'll square him."

The clapping and the singing stopped as the soldiers in the crowd broke off to welcome Picton and his gang. The din of the fairground sounded clear again, clear and lovely after the noise of the coarse song. But from down the road came the wall-muffled shouts of the wildest randy-boo I had ever heard. The old Tavern at home was like a prayer-meeting compared to it.

Headed by Picton who towered above them, the gaslight on his brass buttons and his cap on the back of his head, the crowd moved in a solid block up the street. And then I saw The Cask. How they had ever hoisted that giant tun up there above the door I could not guess, and a wonder it was that two chains and a stanchion could support it.

"Out of the way! Gangway there!"

Picton was already in the doorway, elbowing and thrusting his way into the passage. The noise from inside was like a madhouse. Everybody was shouting and yelling, and every now and again there came the shattering sound of breaking glass and heavy thuds.

"Is Peele inside?" roared Picton.

"Use your bloody ears," shouted someone. "Who do you think is there? The Salvation Army?"

A mingle of cheer, sweat, and tobacco met me as Moc and I pushed our way in after Picton. The more we tried to push forward, the more did those between us and the taproom try to get out.

"Keep out o' th're, boys!" A woman with her hair down over her shoulders and her blouse half out of her skirt-band struggled out past us. "Fetching the police I am. There'll be murder in there afore the night's out."

And then, suddenly, Mac and I were through the door. I took my hand from my money pocket and blinked hard as the tobacco smoke cut into my eyes. The shouting had stopped. Picton stood a yard in front of me, his gang close to him. And there stripped to the waist, just as they had told us, was Jasper.

Chapter 24

FOR a moment I could only blink and stare at him as though I could not believe my eyes. It was The •Coracle at Brecon all over again and with something in it of the terrible unreality of Alltwern barn. Then as the wild rumpus brought me back to myself, I took in the scene that confronted me. Jasper it was right enough, though I doubt if mother would have recognized him. His hair, matted with sweat, was down over his forehead and the day-old growth on his chin and jawl added years to his looks. He had put on weight, too, or was it that without his coat and shirt he was twice the size he normally looked, like Moc when he stripped down. One look at him was enough, however, and my heart groaned inside me as I thought of Sabel and the old people praying for our return. He had cleared a space in front of him and stood there, his fists raised, daring the next to come forward. I saw the girl behind him, too. The expression on her face was one of mingled fear and wild admiration.

“Who’s next?” His voice rose above the hullabaloo, the old Peele edge hard behind it, like the old man’s when the horses wouldn’t pull. “Come on! I haven’t started yet.”

He made a sudden rush forward and one or two staggered back from his blows.

“Rush him, boys!” The looped ends of the landlord’s moustache hung limply on each side of his lips. “Clear him out. Go on! No stomach you’ve got.”

Jasper grinned as one stepped forward.

"All right, boys. Leave him to me!"

At the sound of Picton's voice a hush came over the bar and every head turned to the door. Then, as they recognized who it was, they made way for him.

"It's Jim Picton!"

"Here's your man, Peele!"

"Up the Army! Come on the Swobs!"

Moc and I were carried forward by the surge-in from the passage.

"Time you arrived, soldier." The landlord leaned his paunch over the counter. "Clear this sod out, an' it's drinks on the house. Ruining my trade he is, and on Fair night, too."

"Out with him, Jim! Him an' the girl. The street's the place for them."

Picton was already in his shirt sleeves. His tattooed fore-arms were like a blacksmith's. I tried to push forward towards Jasper, but the soldiers around Picton were like a wall in front of me.

"Know me?" Picton was now ready. His leather belt was armoured all over with regimental badges. He topped Jasper by a good two inches and must have been a score at least heavier. "Jim Picton, that's me. How about it now? You ready?"

The girl whispered something in Jasper's ear, but all he did was to push her to one side. He was grinning all the time.

"Never heard of you, soldier. So you are looking for trouble, eh?" He was crouching a little, his feet shuffling on the floor as if to get a firmer stance.

"No. Handing it out I am. You got it coming to you mate."

Picton half turned and motioned the crowd back to give him space. I saw now that what I had taken to be tattoo marks were coal scars.

"Stand back! Give 'em room! there!"

"I'm your second, Jim."

"No seconds in this," said Jasper. "To a finish this is." His voice had gone quiet, a bad sign with the Peebles as I remembered from Justin and the old man. Mac pushed through the row of soldiers and went across to Jasper. As far as I could see, Jasper did not even notice him. The next second he and Picton were circling round each other.

"Go in, Jasper!" As I shouted his name he looked over in my direction, his eyes startled and the frown perplexed between his black eyebrows. And as he did so, so Picton caught him flush on the mouth.

The roar that went up from the bar almost deafened me, and above it I could hear the landlord shouting that drinks were on the house. Jasper was badly shaken, and the miracle was that he did not go down as Picton followed up with a left and right to the body. Then, as he slipped into a clinch, I saw how his lips were curled back from his teeth. The expression on his face terrified me. As they broke away, Picton's upper-cut only missed him by a hair.

"Go in, Picton. You got him now."

"First blood to Picton! Come on the Swobs!"

Picton was now fighting mad. All I could hear was the shuffle of feet, the thud of blows, and the way Picton's breath hissed out between his teeth each time he swung. The wonder was that Jasper remained on his feet.

"Look out, Jim! He's foxing you."

I stared at the soldier who had shouted as though he was mad. But he shouted again, his voice hoarse with alarm.

"Cool easy, Jim! Watch out for him!"

Even as he called Jasper side-stepped a wild rush of Picton's and clipped him with his right. Picton's eyes rolled, and I saw how his legs gave at the knees. His arms dropped to his side and his head lolled from side to side.

Jasper stepped back, smiling, but his eyes had no pity in them; and I remembered how the soldier had described him the night before in the inn. Then, as Picton recovered and tried to slip into a clinch, Jasper was at him. He clipped Picton from one fist to the other. Once, he even steadied Picton's head with his left before crossing it with his right. Surely, as though he was playing with him, he was reducing Picton's face to a pulp. I felt I could stand it no longer.

"Put him out!" I shouted. "Play the game, Jasper!"

The soldiers, too, were shouting.

"At him, boys. It's bloody murder."

Jasper gave one quick glance at the crowd. Then, as Picton came forward, Jasper ducked, his left leg shooting sideways and the right bending at the knee. Before Picton could recover himself from his impetus, Jasper's right crashed up. Picton's body arched backwards and thudded on the floor, shaking the whole bar.

"Who's next? Anybody else like to teach me my job?"

As Jasper came forward the soldiers fell back. Picton lay where he had fallen, his arms outstretched and one knee raised in the air. No one said a word.

"All right, then. Outside!" As he shouted, Jasper turned to the counter and picked up a flagon. For a moment I feared he was going to break the neck of it and use it as a weapon. Then, wheeling suddenly, he hurled it at the rows of bottles arrayed against the clouded glass behind the counter. The clatter of splintering glass filled the place.

"Take that for a start!" he shouted. "Drinks on the house it is? All over the bloody bar if you ask me. Now outside! Who's first? You?"

My heart almost stopped as he spun Moc around by the shoulder, his fist raised ready to smash into his face. As

Moc's hand closed on his wrist; Jasper stared at him as though seeing a ghost.

"You? . . . What do you want?"

"Get dressed!"

Moc's cap was half out of his pocket and I saw how he had buttoned his coat up to the short lapels. "Get dressed! We'm going home. Are you coming quiet or have we got to carry you?"

I pushed through to Moc's side. As Jasper's eyes swept from one to the other of us, I saw how they clouded for a moment as though he was not sure of himself. Then, hitching up his trousers, he laughed.

"Well, well! My bloody uncle and yours truly Moc!" He turned to the girl.

"Haven't met my family, have you? Come looking for their wandering boy they have." Then, turning to Moc and me, his eyes mocking and daring us, he shouted: "Where's the rest of you? Where's Sabel, or should I say Mrs. Felindre? You should have brought her along." He turned again to the girl: "You should see my cousin, Bron." His hands described Sabel's figure, the fingers curved and outstretched. Then, picking up a glass, he turned to the crowd: "Fill up, boys! A bloody toast—— To the girl I left behind me, Sabel——"

He got no further, and all I heard was the dull smack of bone on bone as Moc's fist took him on the jaw. The tinkle of his broken glass came like the sharp echo of the blow. Then, as Jasper rose to his feet, Moc was at him again. To me he seemed to have swelled to twice his size. And as I cried out to him to hold his punch, he hit Jasper again. Nothing I had ever seen was like the way he delivered it. As for Jasper, he crashed back against the wall and for an instant was spread-eagled against it. Then, as his eyes glazed over, his legs gave under him. Before I was half-way to him, he pitched forward as though

pole-axed. The silence in the bar broke out into a wild uproar.

"Uffern! Did you see that!"

"Must be an old^{er} bruiser. Look at his build!"

Then^{er} as Jasper lay where he had fallen, a dead silence came over^{er} all. As gently as he could, Moc turne^{er}d him over on his back and lifted his eyelid.

"Is . . . is he all right?" I asked.

Moc nodded, his lips quivering. I knew quite well how he felt.

"I had to do it, Ned. More'n I could stand . . . Couldn't hold it."

The landlord came up with a coat and shirt and threw them in a heap at Jasper's side.

"Serves him right. Ruined my trade he have. Get him out before he comes round. This way!" He went and opened the back door, and between us Moc and I lifted Jasper and carried him down the steps into the yard. He was a dead weight, and for a moment I feared it would be his corpse we would be taking home after all. Then, as the cold air began to revive him, he groaned and put his hand to his jaw. His face was ghastly in the light that filtered down on us from the tap-room window; and seeing him in such a pass, I remembered how, after all, it was Justin's son who was lying there in front of us. I looked around me and then at Moc.

The way home led from this very yard.

Chapter 25

EVER SO, the night had not done with us yet. At length, as the three of us talked there in that reeking yard, I began to feel we were wasting precious time. With luck we should be over the mountain before the moon went down. I wanted to put as many miles as we could between us and town before another day went by. By now we had all of us had our say. When Moc started to explain why it was he had hit him, Jasper cut him short and said he had deserved all he'd got. Then, as he himself started to explain, I understood everything clearly . . .

"Afraid I was that you'd see through me," he said. Then, turning to me: "Remember that talk we had by Maesyrian wood?"

I nodded, but let him carry on.

"Well . . . it's still the same with me now . . . Nobody but her. That girl in there——" He laughed like the old man as he jerked his thumb towards the bar. "Just part of the fun she was . . . But Sabel . . . Can't you understand?"

He couldn't go on for a while, and Moc and I both looked away as he sat quiet for a while with his face in his hands. "It's no use, I tell you . . . Don't ask me to go through all that again . . . It's more'n I can stand. Better if I don't see her again . . . Better for her an' for me."

It was then, as calmly as I could, that I began to tell him why it was we had come for him. . . .

Two hours later we were ready to leave. I dared not think what the old man would say when he saw the nag I had bought or hear how much I had had to pay for it. But that was neither here nor there. Jasper had already collected his belongings while Moc and I had gone to our inn for the horses. His sack was now tied, evenly balanced, behind his saddle. The fair had closed down on the stroke of twelve, and except for the singing and shouting in the streets, everything was quiet. The moon was clear of the mountains and showed clearly the narrow gap through which we had come and must now return. But as I say, the night was not through with us yet. As we rode out from the fairground, someone called out Jasper's name.

"Hoi! You there, Peele! Where d'you think you're going?"

As he approached I saw the three stripes on his sleeve.

"What's *he* want?" muttered Moc. "Don't say Picton's pegged out."

The sergeant was now up to us. I looked across at Jasper and saw the set of his jaw.

"Forgetting something, aren't you?" He spoke to Jasper as if he was on the parade ground.

"What's the trouble?" I asked. I could hardly speak for the fear that was inside me.

"No trouble, not yet, anyway. But this chap's already 'listed. . . . Signed up he did this evening and took the King's shilling." He turned to Jasper: "You're in the Army now, lad."

"Me?" Jasper leaned down from the saddle. "Damm, I's tight when I signed it. A bloody hope you got!"

"Tight or not, it don't matter." The sergeant's waxed moustache almost bristled. "We'll sober you all right. Trim your sort to our cut we do. Come on, back to barracks, soldier!"

He seized the reins and turned the nag's head back towards the fairground. The next moment he staggered forward from the blow that caught him behind the ear.

"You can't do it," I cried. "They" —

"Let 'em find me first." As Jasper wheeled round, the sergeant did not move.

An hour later we were riding between the grim walls of the valley. The moon was hidden behind the great rocks and no glow showed in the sky to indicate the place we had left.

As we rode up through the Allt I felt as if the old trees were gathering me up in their arms. The three days we had taken to get here and the weary endless miles in the saddle were all behind us now. The only thing I regretted was that as we came over the mountain the Vans were lost in the darkness. I had dreamed all the time of my first sight of them after being so long away. Nevertheless, despite the early dark, I knew I was home as soon as we crossed the Usk. From then on I could hardly curb my impatience to be riding into the yard. We had sent a telegram from Brecon telling them we would be home by dark. But the horses were tired and it was more than I could think of to rise Doll to a trot as we came down by Tavarn-y-gwynt. Across the valley I could see a light shining from home and I imagined the preparation there for Jasper's homecoming. Then, as we came up from the Lyswen, I found myself peering ahead, sure in my heart that Sabel would be along any minute now to meet us. Jasper was a little quiet, and not for worlds would I have broken on his thoughts. A minute later and we were through the Allt, and there between the hedges and against the sky was someone coming down the road to meet us. At first I thought it was Sabel dressed in her dark winter

coat, and I reined back to give Jasper the chance to be the first she would meet. But as we drew nearer I saw it was not Sabel but a man, too tall and slight for father and not as heavy as Lico. Then, as we drew up to him, I recognized Elias carpenter. To my surprise he made no attempt to stop as I greeted him. All he did was to shake his head and walk on without a word. The first thought that came into my mind was that he disapproved of Jasper's return.

"Who was that?" asked Jasper.

Moc laughed and said something that would have made Elias's ears tingle. I was about to pull him up at that because Eli was, after all, like one of us, when I saw father standing in the middle of the road, a dozen yards or so ahead of us. Something about the way he stood there struck a chill into me, and I felt as if I'd taken a blow under the heart. He was in his greatcoat and best hat; and there behind him was vicar, squire, and three or four others.

I jumped from the saddle at once and ran up to him. A terrible foreboding filled me as I at once thought of Sabel. But Sabel was there behind them, Matti Nanteos with her. Then, as I looked from one of them to the other, I realized who it was that was missing.

"No," I heard myself say. "Not——"

Father nodded. His eyes still stared past me.

"She . . . she went this afternoon . . . just after your telegram Been ailing all the week We tried to get in touch with you . . . Telegraphed the police everywhere to find you . . ." He choked and turned aside.

Vicar came forward and took my arm.

"A terrible shock to you, Edwin . . . But we had to break it to you here. Couldn't think of you coming to the house and knowing nothing about it. . . ."

I suffered them to lead me up the long hill and down to the house. Sabel, I saw, was with Jasper.

As usual the little window looking out on to the road had a light in it; but for once as I crossed the yard there was no one in a white apron to greet me. When I entered the house my boots sounded loud on the stone floor, as if the place were untenanted and cold. Without thinking what I was doing, I went slowly up the stairs and into her bedroom. On the small table beside the bed lay her glasses. I folded them and put them in my inside pocket. No need for the old glasses any more, I said; and as I looked down at her I realized from the calm expression on her face how true my words were. Behind me I could hear Moc's shuddering sobs. Father, as if striving not to give way before us was staring out through the black window. All I could see was the quiver of his shoulders and the way his 'gnarled' hands were clenched at his sides.

First Justin, then Grett; and now mother. So the dark valley was, after all, the old parish, and its soil was the insatiate earth, ever taking the best and finest from our midst.

BOOK FOUR

Chapter 6

WEEK followed week, each day taking us deeper into the winter. The earth was as though numbed with the same grief that had come on us, and for once the November was quiet and dead-still with no tumult of wind in the Allt. Even so, for all the heaviness that lay on father, Moc, and me, not one of us begrudged Sabel the happiness that showed through everything she did. Time and again, forgetting for a moment the quiet of the house she sang as she went about her work. She was again the Sabel we remembered, and though the last stage of our homecoming was still like a bruise on my heart, I never once regretted the journey that Moc and I had made to bring Jasper back to her.

But the earth was not sated yet. . . .

They came for Jasper before the month was out and marched him away as if he was one of the enemy. As they rounded the bend of the lane he held back for a moment and gave a wave of his hand. I held Sabel as gently as I could, and between us Moc and I half carried her back to the house. From that day on I watched her anxiously. The only thing that kept her going was the letter that came almost each day from Jasper. Morning after morning, never mind what the weather was, she went down through the fields to meet Lewsin with the post, and as time went by, it was the old man himself who at last ruled that she and Jasper should wed as soon as he came home on furlough. But when that would be none of us could tell. Within six weeks he was drafted over to France. We knew

that the war, far from being over as we had so confidently thought it would be before the year was out, was only in its first grim phase. No longer did the trumpets sound in the wind, and the flags that had waved so bravely six months before were now in shreds and dipped in sad salute. Hardly a month passed but that vicar remembered some family or other in his prayers.

Here at home we worked as never before. In order to help and do our bit, as the saying was, we turned fields that had not known a coulter since any of us could remember. And it was that I think that saved us. Once again, just as it had been in the old days, we were at it from the moment it was light until it was too dark to see. First the stiff ploughing, the harrowing, the sowing, and then the rolling; and all that came from Jasper was the letter or card telling how he was, but with no hint ever of when he would be coming on leave.

So it went on right through the spring and into the summer. Then, when September came round, there was such a wealth of harvest on the extra fields that we grudged the time to eat and the early dark. But manage it we did, and hardly time there was to think of the past even when Sabel stood on the ricks and took the sheaves as we pitchforked them up to her. So, as golden and soft as ever, September went by and as October sharpened with the first morning frosts I began to wonder and fear what it might have in store for us this year. The news from the front was the same day after day, and a relief it was each morning to see Sabel come running back from meeting Lewsin with Jasper's letter in her hand.

And then, at last, came the news from him we had so long awaited. The first thing we did was to go over to the vicarage as soon as it got dark. Vicar agreed at once that the banns should be called for the first time of asking the following Sunday, so that no time should be lost when

Jasper came. He even quoted from Paul about it being better for people to marry than to fight against a love and passion which was too much to contain.

Life came back to Trewern in the days that followed. All we waited for now was the actual day on which Jasper's leave would start. As far as we could read between the lines of what he wrote, his company was only waiting to be relieved from their forward position. As for us, our plans were all made. Because of seemliness, vicar suggested that the ceremony should take place as soon after eight as we could manage, and we fell in with his idea at once. After all, it was only a year since the old bell had tolled so heavily for mother's funeral. I spent hours imagining a candle-lit service with the light flickering on the gold and brass and falling on Sabel and Jasper as they kneeled on the chancel step. Moc went down to Swansea and came back in a check suit which, as he pointed out, would be handy afterwards for the Mart and Agricultural Shows. What Sabel had bought was taken out of its tissue wrapping and hung in the oak wardrobe until the day of the wedding. Her loveliness these days oftentimes made me cross myself under the cover of my jacket. Times her lovely face was so wild and alive with excitement that you would have thought it was a white wedding she was planning. A blessing it was that October was over again and all the signs set for fair. Not a word or hint of unkind gossip came our way; and though I searched the sky and the mood of the land to see if anything there augured ill for their marriage, all I read there was the reflection of my own acquiescence. It was as if the smile had come back on the land and the blue of the Vans each evening was like a benediction set upon us. The old man never tired of saying how, if mother had been spared, she would have insisted on a proper wedding with a reception here at Trewern. And in the same way that he vouched for mother, so I vouched for Grett.

But the earth, as I say, was not sated yet, nor had the old wheel come to the end of its journey. Before the November had reached its turn there came that day whose very shadow has darkened every word I have so far written. That is why, I suppose, I have not been able to show you Sabel as she really was, for whenever I have thought of her it has been to see her as she was when we found her that night. The same too with Jasper. Hard it is to go back over things and to see them exactly as they were when a certain day or event yawns like a chasm between you and all that went before it. . . .

No need there is to start at the beginning of that day, for I knew long before it darkened that the dawn had been false and the rising sun a lie. Better by far it would have been if the wind had risen in the night and that the noise in the trees had given some hint at least of what it was that lay in store for us. But no; when I awoke that morning, the Vans rode the dawn as never before and as the first light slanted down the Sawdde a radiance lay on the land, so much so that if I had not known it was nigh on Calan Gaeaf I might easily have thought it was again the time of harvest.

There's strange it is that such a day should have dawned so fair.

But it ended on a different note. I felt the weight of the Vans that night, and the parish closed around me like the walls of a grave. By the time the moon came up, round and clean above the troubled hills, the search for Sabel was over. . . . It had gone on all through the afternoon, and by the time it got dark the whole parish had joined with us to look for her.

No trace did we find of her in Maesyrarian woods or along the hushed strathes of the Lyswen. The last to see her was Lewsin when she met him by the stile to get the

letters. But Lewsin could not remember what letters he had brought her. As usual, he had hurried back along the path so that she could read there in peace and undisturbed. I thought at first that she had gone to one of her old haunts to brood and dream in secret over what Jasper had written to her. As like as not he had written to tell her that he was already on his way home. . . . But reflections like these brought me no respite from the heaviness that had come on me. Though there was not a cloud in the November sky, a shadow lay behind the sunlight, and my dread all the time as the old Allt echoed to them calling on Sabel's name was that the shouting should suddenly cease.

So it went on and by dark, as I say, the news had gone round the parish and not a house there was that did not send someone on foot or on horseback to look for Sabel Peele. I see them now as they came and went; vicar in his muddied cassock, squire on his horse, Dico all eyes and with his moustache bristling with fear, Elias quiet and shaking his head whenever my eyes asked him the same old question.

And now at the end, the search shifted over to the Sawdde. The wooded valley was alive with lanterns, and time and again the noise of the river was drowned as one after another shouted out Sabel's name. From where I stood, too weary now to go a step further and knowing in my heart what the night would surely bring, I could see up and down the river. Here in front of me, along the Cwmsidan stretch, the Sawdde was quiet enough. A treat it was always in September or October to walk along its banks here and to see the misshapen moon in every pool. But on this night all I could see was the gleam and twinkle of lanterns. . . . Now Moc called out her name, and as I heard his voice break with hoarse weariness, I thought of the old man up at Trewern, the lantern ready by him

to hang out on the sycamore if Sabel should unexpectedly return.

"Sabel! . . . Sabel Peele. . . !"

Dico's great voice rolled up through the valley only to be followed by others as they searched here and there for her. Nothing now but men coming and going, peering into every pool and sometimes crying out with terror and awe in the voice when a white foamcake cheated them into thinking it was an upturned face. But I could do nothing. It was as if the book of our history had opened itself at the last page and no need there was to read what was written there in that firm, unalterable hand.

Then, at last, came the moment I had dreaded all through the day. The last echo of Sabel's name went from rock to rock, borne up by the wind to where I stood, dying with the whisper of the river as though the old parish was loath to relinquish the music of it. I hear it now again, the rocks of Graig Ddu doing my shouting for me and the echo of it bringing to mind the gaiety that was hers before Jasper came our way. . . .

I looked down towards the wooded cleft of the valley below Cwmsidan. Not a sound now, only the cold chuckle of the river and the wind half crying. Then, as I waited there, I saw the lanterns converging one by one from all directions until they became one in a knot of light. Presently, the lights started to move in slow procession along the bank of the river towards me. But as they drew nearer and nearer, I could not bring myself to look up. Even so, there was no escaping it. First one, then another and another until the river glimmered with reflected lights, they came nearer to where I waited. And then I saw a gap between the reflected lights, an emptiness, a black void, and then a dozen or more lanterns bringing up the rear.

Moc's arm was around me like a band of iron as I looked down at Sabel. The light from the circle of lanterns showed

up the loveliness of her figure as the sodden blouse and dripping skirt clung to her. Her beauty was touched with peace and contentment. It was something I had not seen there since Jasper went away. Then, as Moc made to cover her with his jacket, jealous perhaps that so many eyes were on her, I put out my hand and stopped him. I felt that I wanted to look and look at her. And it was then, as I stared down at her, that Rhys blacksmith handed me the letter. He said something how it was the sight of it lying on the bank that had taken them to the pool. At first I could only stare uncomprehendingly at the type-written sheet. Then, as squire brought the light nearer, a great peace and understanding came on me. No need there was to read the vain words of condolence. So they were together at last! Here, laid on a gate with ferns framing her, lay Sabel; and there, straight across the Vans and beyond the sea, lay Jasper. I could see him clearly, the lurid gun flashes flickering unheeded over his upturned face. Behind me, as he read the letter over my shoulder, I heard vicar saying that it was for love she had died and that none could now sunder whom God had joined in death.

All terror left me. I walked at her side all the way, and when at last we crossed the Lyswen and came to the Allt, the old trees seemed to put out their arms to receive her for the last time. And as we came in sight of the house, I felt as if the years had rolled back and that Justin, Grett, and mother were there to receive us; Jasper, too. . . Jasper too. But when we crossed the yard, the lanterns throwing our shadows on the white-washed walls, the only one there to meet us was the old man. He looked for a moment as if he would not give way to the visitant who was becoming too constant and frequent a comer to Trewern. But only for a moment. As he came forward, Dico and Rhys blacksmith lowered the gate on to the flagstones in front of the door. Then, more gently than he had ever done any-

thing in his life before, the old man bent down and lifted Sabel in his arms. I went before him up the stairs and lighted him into the room that she and Jasper should have occupied before the month was out.

Don't tell me that death is cruel and harsh to the dead, for I know different. And it is well inured I am to his presence; nor does he have to ask the way to Trewern. He knows the road as well as I do, and the dark of an October or November night in no way deters or confounds him. But when he comes I know now that it is peace and rest he brings. I learnt that when I went out to see Sabel after the women had finished with her. And fair play to Matti Nanteos and Dico's wife, they had left Sabel as she was. As I went up the stairs I was half afraid that they might have laid her out in her wedding clothes, because women are like that. But no; they left Sabel as she was, just as if, indeed, they had realized that it was to her dark marriage she had gone when the Sawdde soothed her hurt. There's wonderful and past telling must have been the meeting of those two below Cwmsidan woods. And when before in the old parish had a bridal procession been lantern-lighted home through the dark of a winter's night. . . .

Vicar never once suggested or even hinted that Sabel should not be laid next to mother and Grett, nor did anyone in the parish dare to question her right to be there. Then, a week or so after the funeral, they sent us Jasper's belongings from France; and I am glad now that I have the letters that passed between him and Sabel. Naturally, had I found his to Sabel in time, I would have placed them with her. But it was not until I had the heart to go through her things that I found them. Then, when Jasper's "effects" as they called them, came home to us—and addressed to Sabel they were in accordance with the

instructions in his army book—I placed both the bundles in mother's coffer, together with Justin's diary, his gaff, and his pipe. And with them, unread alas by Sabel, went the last letter that he wrote her. The date on it is November the twenty-third that year.

“Every word I am now writing [he began] is straight and true from my heart. That is one thing that life up here in the line does to you. It knocks every lie out of a chap and he dare not be false to himself or to anybody else because the bullet that's got his name on it might nail the lie in his very throat. Listen, then. I love you, Sabel; I love you. That is all I can say, and as far as I'm concerned, it is everything; nothing else matters. I've been thinking a lot these last few days. Although I am licensed to kill, there is such a tenderness on me that it almost makes me cry, so wonderful it is. I know now that there is a meaning behind everything. It's true, Sabel. I can see now that I had to go away from you the first time to learn how much you meant to me. If I had stayed with you, life would have been too easy and soft, a case of having you and your kisses on the cheap. I am glad now of those months I put in with the Fair. I touched rock bottom then. But never mind what I did, or who I tried to pick up with, it was you all the time. And I'll tell you this, too. Even if your father and Moc had not come for me, I would have drunk and belted my way back to you before the end. You've got to believe that. And, again, a good job it was that I had 'listed before they did bring me back. If I'd come back free, I'd never have had the courage or the will to join up and leave you. So here I am, and I'm not sorry. It's what my father would be doing if he was alive, farm or no farm. You agree, don't you?

“I don't worry any more about us being cousins. We'll

be closer than that before this month is out. It will be any day now. But I still can't believe that our banns have been called, especially when I look at your photograph. That's the one good thing about the barrage, never mind if it's Jerry's or ours—I don't have to strike a light to see you in the dark. Look, I want to ask you one favour. It's about our wedding night. I want us to walk over to the Fagddu woods as soon as it gets dark. It was there I dreamt of you every day that winter, and I want to tell the trees still standing that you are mine at last. Then, as we turn back for Trewern, perhaps the moon will come up over the Vans. Can't you see us walking home through the Dyfnant, me with my arm around you, and you with your head against my shoulder? Oh, Sabel, I have dreamt about it so much that I already know every step of the way. You will say yes, won't you?

"Please excuse scribble. I haven't much time. The barrage will lift any minute now. I wish Moc was here with me. He'd show them, and so will I too. Don't worry, we Peeles always come through. And what is more, we always get what we want. That's what you once wrote to me, remember? And I'm not forgetting what you wrote in your last letter when you said that no matter what would come, nothing could ever keep us apart. . . ."

The barrage must have lifted just then, because it was his officer who sent the unfinished letter on to us, Lewsin handing it to me on that afternoon when our yard was black with people and the old funeral hymn sounding once more down to the Allt.

So she had said that. Sabel had said that! And I know how her eyes must have looked when she wrote it to him. And so, I fancy, did he look as she stood that day on the brink of the Sawdde. Little wonder it was that, after reading

it, there was no bitterness in my heart as I followed her down through the Allt and over the Lyswen bridge.

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Dark^wanes the moon now and soon it will be too dark for ^fue to pick out the Vans against the sky. Even so, all is well with me. . . . The feel of the old parish is around me like a friendly hand, and home is the place where you can find what you want without a light.

I am thinking now of the old book. Enough of poetry there is for me in that now; besides, the print is bigger and I have not opened Trebor Mai or Dafydd ab Gwilym for years, for they belong to the past when the blood was wild and leaping. But now it is the old book, and right and true it says that it is through a mirror we see, and that darkly and blurred. But soon, it can't be long now, for three score and ten have long been my lot—soon, it will be face to face. Good-bye to Sawdde; good-bye to the Vans that saw the beginning and the end of the Peeles. But never mind, it was all good and glorious. Yes, face to face it will be. Face to face again with Justin, with the old people; face to face with Sabel who was so lovely in her day, and Jasper who turned at the bend of the Allt as he went away. And face to face with Grett, and it's Grett Ellis she'll be, Grett Rhos Dirion just as she was on that day in the mill at Brecon. And now with the old wheel coming up so slow for its last turn, I say with vicar—What matter at all if the road be longⁿ and dark if at the end we come to the great light? And a grand journey it has been, too, and great and grand the company. Let me say it again, for I was ever one to repeat myself; for now we see as in a glass, darkly, but then face to face. “. . .

By the Same Author

MOULDED IN EARTH

Book Society Recommendation

2nd Printing

“Will rank with Richard Llewelyn’s masterpiece. *Moulded in Earth* is an artistic triumph and, as a first effort a brilliant achievement.”
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WHO RIDETH SO WILD

“His evocative, descriptive talent is as notable as ever. He does supremely well. In Richard Vaughan Wales has a novelist to be proud of.”—*Western Mail*.

“The story is lifted by the descriptions of the countryside and the excellent ‘crowd scenes’ at the Eisteddfod and the Revival.”
—*Liverpool Daily Post*.

GEORGE MALCOLM

Standard said of Mr. Vaughan's new novel, *Living* transfusion for the anæmic British novel. Other critics praised its strength of characterisation and the lyrical power of its love story. Readers of it will not have forgotten the tempestuous Justin Peele nor his tragic death which ended the feud between the Peeles and the Ellises.

THIS new novel is the story of Justin's son. It is not so much a sequel to *Moulded in Earth* as the second half of a saga. Its theme is the impact of this illegitimate son on the Peele family and is a brilliant piece of characterisation, bringing out in him many of the striking characteristics of Justin which are yet modified and given their own personal force by the influence of his mother and by his own resentments.

MR. VAUGHAN has a most graphic feeling for the Welsh countryside. His people are part of that dramatic scenery round the Black Mountains, and the power of their rootedness is used with great poetic momentum as it reveals the effect of the passage of time on them. Here is Daniel Peele, much older, with his obstinate pride in his strength still there, but losing gradually the physical ability to turn it into action. It irks him that he must accept the decision of younger people who have inherited his fire and have no qualms about using it in their own way. On Edwin Peele and his wife, Grett falls the burden of the story for it is with their daughter that Justin's son falls in love, and it is Edwin who tells the story as he did in *Moulded in Earth*.